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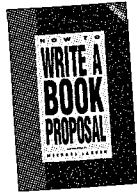
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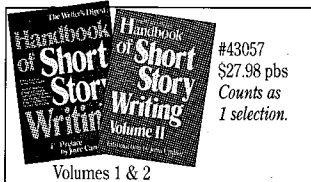
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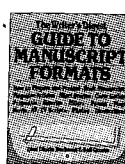


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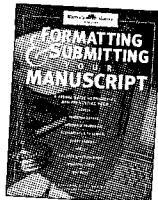
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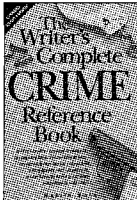
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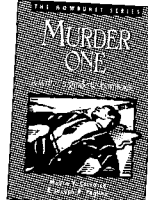
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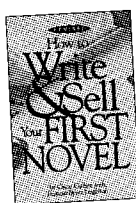
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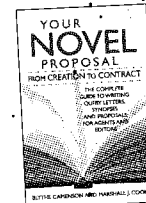
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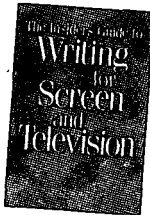
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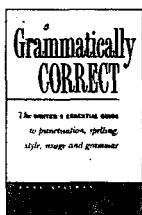
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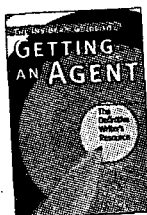
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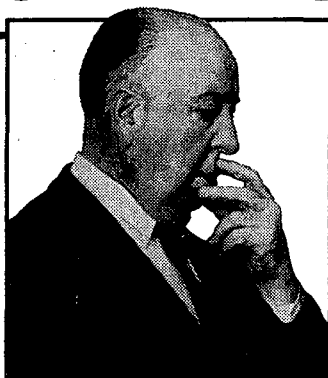
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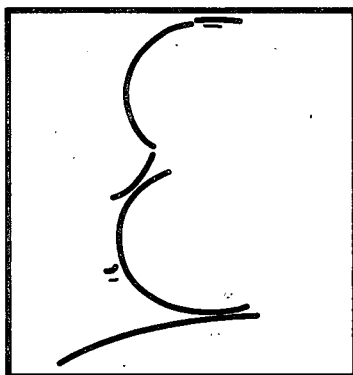
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GUEST EDITORIAL

Philip Giraldi

THE CIA GHOST A MEMOIR

When I joined the Central Intelligence Agency in 1976, I learned that there's a file on virtually everything. The Agency sucks up information on people and events like a vast vacuum cleaner, organizes everything into convenient categories, and then files it away, most often never again to be seen by the eyes of man, a vast ocean of information stamped SECRET or TOP SECRET.

The Agency also has its rituals and stories that are never written down and are conveyed anecdotally over beer and cigarettes, stories about professional embarrassments or the bizarre personal behavior of certain officers; stories that are intricate explanations of how some certifiably insane bozo rose to the senior ranks.

I know, however, of only one CIA ghost story.

While I never directly experienced the ghost myself during my sixteen years with the Agency, I have spoken to a number of officers who did hear or see something frightening. I also lived for a time across the road from the haunted house. Though my colleagues must of necessity remain nameless in my tale, this is really their story.

Ghosts and spying do not necessarily go together. Indeed, espionage is a hardheaded and demanding profession that eschews an excess of imagination. In the minds of most CIA officers, ghosts and haunted houses properly belong to the world of fantasy together with werewolves, vampires, and firebreathing dragons. Recruiting

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and handling spies is more serious stuff.

The supernatural was rarely spoken of by the burned-out men and women returning from overseas assignments, where the dangers were all too real. Few officers would be interested even in reading a horror story. Could the *frisson* coming from a piece of fiction possibly be as disturbing as watching a captured terrorist being interrogated in a Middle Eastern prison?

But sometimes a sense of melancholy or a desire to share a scarcely understood experience moved someone who had experienced the CIA ghost to speak. He would most often begin tentatively, even light-heartedly. If he were not laughed at, he'd go on—and quite often, on the following morning, regretted that he'd broken his silence. Such things were better not spoken of, not even with colleagues.

The CIA ghost is located at the Agency's primary training center, Camp Peary, near Williamsburg, Virginia. Peary was a restful place to spend some time, and many an officer was sent there to dry out, deal with family problems, or overcome frayed nerves. But it was not a good career choice for the ambitious, and no one was sent there who had serious professional aspirations. Everyone in the Agency referred to Peary as "The Farm," though the only thing that grew on or near it was swamp grass. An insider in the world of intelligence never used its true name, just as everyone once said "The Company" instead of CIA.

I suppose I first learned about The Farm's legendary haunted house, Quarters 118, as a student in 1977. The small brick structure that sat by itself at a bend in the road was nearly surrounded by dark pinewoods. One of the ancient farmhouses that had been part of the village of Magruder, it stood near an old chapel and a group of Confederate graves. In my student days I never had the chance to go inside it. But I knew about it. It was the haunted house. There was no other.

Seven years later, in 1984, I had mixed feelings about returning to The Farm as an instructor. After a frustrating tour in Germany I wanted something less stressful, but I did not look forward to working with the boozers and burnout cases that littered the teaching landscape. I hoped I'd be able to survive a year or two wrapped up in my own projects and priorities.

Like all instructors I was required to live on base in temporary quarters. I can't say that I was surprised when I was assigned a small clapboard farmhouse that looked across a field at Quarters 118. The choice of quarters made me recall the stories that I'd heard years earlier, stories that had interested me greatly and impelled me to seek out and question former residents whenever I encountered them at headquarters or overseas.

It made me uneasy to find myself living so close to 118, but expressions of fear are not well regarded in the CIA and I quietly accepted my lot. My wife thought

Camp Peary was an abysmal backwater with little to recommend it but mosquitoes and ticks. For her, country charm was found only in close proximity to horses and foxhounds, so she'd gone to stay with her family in England. I was alone.

I had always both dreaded and been drawn by tales of the supernatural. It helped that I was reared by a Central European family who firmly believed in ghosts. My grandmother was haunted by my dead grandfather, a suicide, who as a ghost did not hesitate to bring his coffin into their bedroom. In a dream, my mother later saw that same grandmother as a young woman in a new dress dancing through a field of spring flowers. Grandma died the next day. The dress arrived in the mail two days later, sent by a distant relative.

And then there are those haunted places where the hair on your scalp rises and the soul inside you cries out. I remember standing in a cypress-shrouded mausoleum in Rome surrounded by tourists, none of whom felt the unseen horror that shook me. And once when I stood on an outcropping of land next to a Byzantine wall on the Bosphorus, gazing toward the Black Sea on a warm, sunny day, a deep feeling of emptiness and loss suddenly came over me, my stomach as cold as ice. Who had been maimed or slaughtered on that spot, leaving the mark of torment behind—victims crying out to be remembered, trapped in a place beyond all time? So for me there could be no denial, or even skepticism, when confront-

ed by a possible haunted house. I knew deep down that such places might exist. Indeed, that they do exist.

On a rainy Saturday I moved into my quarters. Later that day I walked over to 118 and spoke with the officer living there. He was out in the yard stacking firewood and was friendly as CIA people almost always are when talking to colleagues. In his early forties, he was still looking forward to a break in his career that would move him into the senior ranks. He had served in a number of dangerous posts and had not yet given up hope in the system; he wanted to believe that the faithful warrior would eventually arrive in Valhalla.

Though I had no such illusions regarding myself, it was easy to talk about places we'd been, people we'd known. But amidst all our talk of career and experiences shared, my neighbor struck me as a bit nervous. I attributed it to his having recently served back-to-back tours in several African countries where fighting was going on. Every once in a while he paused to look back at the house, possibly expecting me to raise the issue of 118's reputation. But he said nothing. Nor did I. Afterwards we'd see each other in the halls of the classroom building and nod.

Some weeks later I began to think that the house's reputation was undeserved. My own old house squeaked and groaned with age, and I suspected 118 made similar noises in the night. But gradually I began to sense a presence, partic-

ularly on those winter nights that were as cold and dark as a grave. I would walk into my own house and feel as if I were being watched from the dark house across the way. Sometimes I felt that someone had been in my living room and had left abruptly as I arrived. At other times I was certain things I'd left lying about had been moved or handled as if I were being played with or subtly teased.

Colleagues who'd served in the Soviet Union often told how the KGB sneaked into their apartments and rearranged small items to send a message that they were not to be trifled with. But this was different. There was no KGB at The Farm, and it was not as if I actually saw or experienced anything. I hoped my fears were only the result of an overwrought imagination, so I avoided speaking with my neighbor at 118. I didn't want to know anything about what was happening across the way.

The Farm is in the middle of perhaps the most historic few hundred square miles in America. Like an enormous thumb jutting out between the James and York rivers, Virginia's Peninsula was the site of Jamestown, the earliest permanent English settlement in America, and of Williamsburg, Virginia's colonial capital. Nearby was Yorktown, where Cornwallis surrendered to Washington and the British band played "A World Turned Upside Down." As a buff of the colonial and Civil War periods, I had always known something of the area's folktales and legends, and I

soon delved into local history to distract myself during the long winter nights. Bent over a book I didn't have to think about how my living room and bedroom windows looked across to the dark house and woods at the bend in the road.

On the Peninsula, what passes for land is mostly swamp and cypress bog. Even today roads are few and far between. Colonial Williamsburg was an Indian town before the Europeans arrived. Although the area was regarded as malarial and unhealthy, both Indian and colonist persevered in the settlement. The Indians lived off the richness of the tidal estuary with its great river, and the first European settlers described the abundant plant and animal life.

After sending the local Indians to labor and die on tobacco plantations, the Englishmen soon felled the huge bald cypresses surrounding the swamps. The wood went into the houses of the colonial city. The hawks and eagles fled, the foxes and lynxes were hunted into extinction, and the fish were brought in with huge seine nets until there were no more left to catch.

Death brought tranquility as the Europeans moved inland to more fertile pastures. The only humans who remained were from a local clan called the Magruders. They built clapboard houses along the York River's shore and eked out a poor living on whatever crawled, swam, or grew nearby.

Isolated and neglected, the area slept while Williamsburg itself went into decline and economic ac-

tivity moved westward, towards Richmond. In colonial times most trade moved along the coast, from landing to landing, past small villages. The locals were an inbred, superstitious lot, speaking softly in their own singsong dialect that survived on the fringes of the swamps and dark woods. Distrusting strangers, they lived by fishing and harvesting the salt grass along the great rivers to sell for animal fodder. They kept to themselves. In the early nineteenth century, riverboat captains often accused them of piracy and worse, trading with them only when they were directly under the boatmen's guns. One such village was Magruder, close to the York River.

During the Civil War, elements of the Confederate Army of General Joseph E. Johnston made a desperate stand against the overwhelming forces of the Union's General George B. McClellan. In the so-called Battle of Fort Magruder, Virginia militia were cut down by merciless Yankee cannon-fire before the Rebels withdrew. Years later their remains were discovered and buried in a shallow pit in the graveyard next to a small chapel that served the villagers' spiritual needs.

Magruder became part of Camp Peary when the base was created to train the Navy Department's Seabees in the 1940's. When The Company later took over, its ten thousand acres were surrounded with barbed wire and sophisticated alarms. The surviving houses of old Magruder were modernized

and became base housing for the instructors.

I well recall how rituals continued to be played out on the lake shore when I was a student. Some macabre appeal drew fledgling CIA officers to the chapel with its ancient live oaks and the depression in the ground where the Confederate dead slept.

Drinking parties in the graveyard were frequent. Pranksters sometimes seized and bound unpopular classmates, leaving them atop the mass grave to contemplate their rejection. Several years later it was reported that a young officer had died after a night spent on the ground. Some said he'd died of exposure; others referred to an unsuspected weak heart. Another story was that he had been waiting for a girlfriend from his class who, alas, never arrived at their rendezvous. The matter was somehow hushed up, and afterwards few willingly visited the chapel and grave at night. The dead again slept alone.

I began to note that my neighbor's dog, a hound named Sam, howled through the night. Closing Sam in the house made him go wild in his attempts to escape, and I could see him racing around the yard pursued by my neighbor and his wife. Later I saw that they let the poor beast sleep in the garage. Later still, they built a small lean-to for him, and he was able to pass his days chasing squirrels and rabbits. The dog always kept far from the house. I myself felt a sense of dread and preferred to

spend more and more time either at the club or in town. But I still had to go back to my quarters to sleep.

I thought I knew, anecdotally, the story of Quarters 118 as well as anyone. In late 1945, the Second World War triumphantly concluded, a newly minted naval ensign and his young bride lived in the house, then designated as Basic Officers Married Quarters. The officer came from a prominent family, but he liked to drink and gamble and was constantly short of funds. His wife was a local girl, the oldest daughter of a prosperous farmer.

It seemed that the ensign managed to get into a little more debt than usual one night at five card stud. He covered his losses by dipping into his unit's mess funds, which he controlled. As his losses mounted in the ensuing weeks, his borrowing also increased, and it was inevitable that he would be caught and court-martialed.

Deeply ashamed and unable to explain himself to his wife or family, he drove home on the day before the court was due to convene. His wife had just returned from the base hospital, where she had learned that she was pregnant. She sat in the front room, her feet on a worn ottoman. She was said to be an attractive young woman, and it's easy to imagine her smiling contentedly, humming to herself and lazily running her fingers through her long chestnut hair.

The ensign entered the house by the kitchen door and walked down the hall to the front room. Drawing

his service Colt .45, he shot his wife in the face, perhaps as she turned to him with a smile of welcome. A second shot went through her heart. He then took her by the ankles and dragged her bleeding body through the hall and up the stairs to the second floor landing.

A pull-down ladder led to the attic, which was closed off by a hatchway. The ensign climbed up, slid open the hatch, and tied a rope to a beam. He made a noose, put it around his neck, and stepped into space, his legs kicking frantically, suspended over his wife's body. He slowly strangled to death, his tongue blue and swollen, voiding himself at the moment of death.

He went to a suicide's grave, and his wife was buried in the family plot on her father's farm.

That would have been the end of it but for the haunting. Many later occupants of the house reported strange noises and smells. Some felt an unreasoning fear whenever they entered. Several families demanded that they be moved to other quarters; they were accommodated whenever possible. Some experienced nothing strange, however, and scoffed at the stories. If the house were truly haunted, its spirits did not make themselves known to everyone, and no one was ever confronted or harmed.

By several accounts, animals were the most affected by whatever was present in the house. Some tenants said that no dog or cat would climb to the second floor landing. My neighbor told me that his dog also feared the hallway,

continued on page 231

EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

Every spring the Mystery Writers of America hosts what is known in the field as Edgar Week. The highlight is the gala banquet, attended by writers, editors, publishers, agents, and other people involved in the mystery world, that is given on Thursday evening of Edgar Week. At the banquet the MWA awards are presented—a porcelain bust of Edgar Allan Poe, mostly—to the authors of the best in mystery writing during the preceding year. (The “best” is determined by MWA committees in each of the various categories.)

This year’s banquet took place on May fourth at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in New York.

We are particularly pleased to announce that the Robert L. Fish Memorial Award for Best First Mystery Short Story of 1999 went to Mike Reiss for “Cro-Magnon, P.I.,” a story in AHMM’s July-August 1999 issue. Congratulations to him! (We do believe that this was our first prehistoric mystery.)

You may recall from our Editor’s Notes of a year ago that Mr. Reiss is a former television writer, with three Emmys as writer/producer for *The Simpsons* among numerous other credits. But writing a mystery short story is not the same and, as he stressed to us, it’s hard work. We’re glad that it seemed

worth the effort to him, and you’ll find a second Reiss tale, “Another Day in Paradise,” in this issue.

The committee that chooses the Fish Award, by the way—which doubles as the committee for Best Short Story—names no nominees, only a winner. It was established in 1983 by Robert Fish’s wife, in honor of her recently deceased husband’s interest in encouraging new writers of mystery fiction. Since then, AHMM stories have won nine times out of the sixteen times the award has been presented, something we are very proud of here.

Following are the nominees for all the rest of the awards, with the winners in boldface. Our particular congratulations in this group go to Jan Burke, winner of the Edgar for Best Novel—and a contributor to these pages. Her most recent story for us was “A Fine Set of Teeth” (October 1998).

BEST NOVEL OF 1999:

***Bones* by Jan Burke (Simon & Schuster)**

River of Darkness by Rennie Airth (Viking)

L.A. Requiem by Robert Crais (Doubleday)

Strawberry Sunday by Stephen Greenleaf (Scribner)

In a Dry Season by Peter Robinson (Avon)

BEST FIRST NOVEL BY AN AMERICAN AUTHOR:

***The Skull Mantra* by Eliot Pattison (St. Martin's)**

***Certifiably Insane* by Arthur W. Bahr (Simon & Schuster)**

***Big Trouble* by Dave Barry (Putnam)**

***God Is a Bullet* by Boston Teran (Knopf)**

***Inner City Blues* by Paula L. Woods (Norton)**

BEST PAPERBACK ORIGINAL:

***Fulton County Blues* by Ruth Birmingham (Berkley)**

***Lucky Man* by Tony Dunbar (Dell)**

***The Resurrectionist* by Mark Graham (Avon)**

***Outcast* by José Latour (Akashic Books)**

***In Big Trouble* by Laura Lippman (Avon)**

BEST SHORT STORY:

"Heroes" by Anne Perry (*Murder and Obsession*, ed. by Otto Penzler, Delacorte)

"Triangle" by Jeffery Deaver (EQMM, March 1999)

"Snow" by Stuart M. Kaminsky (*First Cases*, Vol. III, ed. by Robert J. Randisi, Signet)

"Paleta Man" by Laurie R. King (*Irreconcilable Differences*, ed. by Lia Matera, HarperCollins)

"Crack" by James W. Hall (*Murder and Obsession*, ed. by Otto Penzler, Delacorte)

BEST YOUNG ADULT MYSTERY:

***Never Trust a Dead Man* by Vivian Vande (Harcourt)**

***Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson**

(Farrar, Straus & Giroux)

***That Kind of Money* by Vicki Cameron (Indigo Books)**

***The Ghost in the Tokaido Inn* by Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler (Philomel)**

***Monster* by Walter Dean Myers (HarperCollins)**

BEST JUVENILE MYSTERY:

***The Night Flyers* by Elizabeth McDavid Jones (Pleasant Company Publications)**

***Howie Bowles, Secret Agent* by Kate Banks, illus. by Isaac Millman (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)**

***Shadow Horse* by Alison Hart (Random House)**

***Dolphin Luck* by Hilary McKay (McElderberry Books, a division of Simon & Schuster)**

***Green Thumb* by Rob Thomas (Simon & Schuster)**

BEST FACT CRIME:

***Blind Eye* by James B. Stewart (Simon & Schuster)**

***The Ghosts of Hopewell* by Jim Fisher (Southern Illinois University Press)**

***Mean Justice* by Edward Hume (Simon & Schuster)**

***And Never Let Her Go* by Ann Rule (Simon & Schuster)**

***Disco Bloodbath* by James St. James (Simon & Schuster)**

BEST CRITICAL/BIOGRAPHICAL WORK:

***Teller of Tales: The Life of Arthur Conan Doyle* by Daniel Stashower (Holt)**

***The Oxford Companion to Crime & Mystery Writing* ed. by**

Rosemary Herbert (OUP)

A Suitable Job for a Woman by
Val McDermid (Poisoned Pen)

The Web of Iniquity: Early Detective Fiction by American Women by Catherine Ross Nickerson
(Duke University Press)

Ross Macdonald by Tom Nolan
(Scribner)

BEST PLAY:

The Art of Murder by Joe Di
Pietro, produced by Jonathan Pollard, The American
Stage Company's Becton
Theatre, March 3, 1999

Everybody's Ruby by Thulani
Davis, produced by George C.
Wolfe, The Joseph Papp Public
Theatre, March 8, 1999

BEST MOVIE:

*Lock, Stock and Two Smoking
Barrels*, screenplay by Guy
Ritchie (Polygram)

Cookie's Fortune, screenplay by
Anne Rap (ORT)

Run, Lola, Run, screenplay by
Tom Tykwer (Sony Picture Classics)

The Talented Mr. Ripley, screenplay by Anthony Minghella
based on a novel by Patricia
Highsmith (Miramax)

Titus, screenplay by Julie Taymor
and William Shakespeare (Fox)

BEST TELEVISION EPISODE:

(Note: All the following are from
Law & Order, NBC.)

"Refuge, Part 2," by Rene Balcer

"Hate" by Rene Balcer

"Merger" by Lynn Mamet

"Empire," teleplay by Robert
Palm, story by Rene Balcer and
Robert Palm

"Killerz" by Richard Sweren

BEST TV FEATURE/MINISERIES:

A Slight Case of Murder by
Steven Schachter and William H. Macy, based on a
novel by Donald Westlake
(TNT)

Dalziel & Pascoe: Bones and Silence by Alan Plater, based on a
novel by Reginald Hill (A&E)

Big Brass Ring by George Hickenlooper and F. X. Feeney (Showtime)

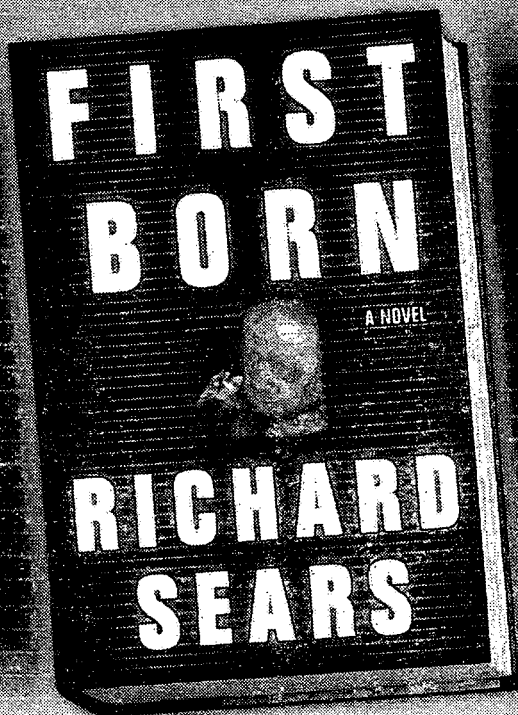
Murder in a Small Town by
Gilbert Pearlman and Gene
Wilder (A&E)

In the Company of Spies by Roger
Towne (Showtime)

The Grand Master this year was Mary Higgins Clark; a Raven went to the Mercantile Library, Harold Augenbraum, director; and the Ellery Queen Award went to Susanne Kirk.

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Dead Weight

D. H. Reddall

By eight thirty only the tops of the buildings on Division Street were illuminated. Then the sun dropped below the hills, and the town receded into grainy blue obscurity.

The street was deserted, the stores dark save for the Beard Building, where one window cast a yellow trapezoid onto the sidewalk.

At nine Richard Ives shut off the light and locked the lobby door. He paused to light a cigarette. In the sulphurous flare his features stood out in sharp relief. He started up the street toward the parking lot.

The model police car emerged from a darkened doorway, miniature red and blue lights flashing. It whirled softly down the sidewalk, passed beneath a streetlamp, and came to rest by the toe of his loafer.

Ives looked around for the operator, saw nothing.

He squatted down for a closer look and saw the note, a piece of paper taped to the antenna. Removing it he read:

"Goodbye, Richie."

The cigarette fell from nerveless fingers in a shower of sparks. He had time for one backward step before the night erupted in flame and concussion.

Billingsgate is the kind of place where a captain seats you, the wine steward wears a little silver cup

around his neck, and the chef swears in French. The menu features things like ouzo-cured salmon gravlax with a cucumber-yogurt coulis and purple potato and shallot salad. And that's just an appetizer.

I had on my best clothes for the occasion: clean Levi's, blue oxford shirt, lightweight tan sports jacket, new white sneakers. The captain looked me over like something he'd found on his shoe, then reluctantly led me to a table where Marissa Garrett was sipping a glass of white wine.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Stubblefield. Under the circumstances, I thought it best to meet on neutral ground, so to speak."

She was younger than I'd expected, late twenties with ash-blond hair swept back from well-tanned patrician features and held with a silver barrette. She was poised and expensively attired like the rest of the clientele. I probably wasn't any more conspicuous than a cat in a birdcage.

A waiter appeared. Mrs. Garrett ordered without consulting the menu. "I'll have the leg of lamb with the ancho chili rub, flageolet beans, and black caviar mashed potatoes, Henry."

She hadn't mentioned anything about picking up the tab, and my loan officer was on vacation. I or-

dered a designer water to impress Henry. He stifled a yawn and drifted toward the kitchen.

"Aren't you lunching?" she asked.

"I've already lunched," I lied.

"What did you want to consult me about, Mrs. Garrett?"

She sipped some wine, dabbed her lips on a blindingly white napkin, sighed.

"I think my husband may be seeing another woman."

"Why do you think so?"

She gave me a sad little smile. "You mean besides a woman's intuition? I'm employed as a financial planner. It isn't surprising that I should notice something irregular in my domestic finances."

"Irregular as in what?"

"I know what my husband earns—he's an attorney, by the way, in his father's firm, Garrett and Stearns. Obviously I know what I earn, and there is nothing inordinately complex about our expenditures." She described a small circle on the tablecloth with her wineglass. "There have been discrepancies."

"How large?"

"Large enough that I noticed them." She straightened up in her chair. "A little background. I married Roger after he completed law school. That was three years ago. I first noticed a shortfall, if you will, two years ago. Of course I discussed it with him. His explanation was entirely plausible: there was a trip to Atlantic City with old college friends where he lost a bit of money at the tables; some other out-of-pocket expenses that I don't remember now—all credible."

Henry appeared with my bottled water and a cut crystal glass. He managed to communicate disapproval with every gesture.

"To make it brief," she continued when Henry was gone, "credits and debits didn't jibe. I couldn't account for about ten thousand dollars. I reviewed our taxes again this year and found the same thing—only now it's about fifteen thousand. I went so far as to look at his personal checkbooks, without his knowledge, of course. I found nothing untoward."

"And you assume he's stepping out?"

"Roger doesn't drink except at social occasions, and his trips to Atlantic City notwithstanding—there was another last year—he is not a gambler."

"You think he's using those trips as an explanation for the money."

"Possibly."

"Is he away much?"

"No. He stays at the office occasionally but not all that often. He usually brings work home." She worried her napkin a bit. "I assume it's a daytime affair. I can't confront him without evidence, so I'm asking you to follow him. No photos. I couldn't bear that. Just let me know if he's—" Her voice trailed off. She was crying soundlessly.

The woman at the next table was glaring at me. She went about two fifty. Her hair appeared to have been styled with a quart of motor oil and an egg beater. She looked prepared to snatch me out of my chair and heave me through the stained glass windows onto Ocean Street.

Marissa Garrett composed her-

self in time for Henry's next arrival. Her meal was huddled in the middle of an enormous plate. The outer edge of the plate was artfully sprinkled with bits of ground parsley, presumably to shift attention from the pitifully small portions in the center. At twenty-seven dollars the meal came to about nine dollars a mouthful by my estimate.

I said, "Henry should wear a mask."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing. How will I contact you?"

She gave me her business card, and we negotiated the standard contract. I thought I heard a collective sigh of relief as I left the room.

There was a Wendy's on the way back to the office. Nobody sneered at my sneakers.

Garrett and Stearns is located on Winter Street in a nicely restored Victorian structure that, seventy years ago, was probably someone's summer home. Behind it there's a parking area with several slots reserved for the pleaders. The automaker's craft was on display there: a white Caddy, a midnight blue Lexus, and, in Roger Garrett's space, a silver BMW Z3 roadster.

As usual, I checked for provocative bumper stickers and was rewarded with THE ROAD TO HELL IS PAVED WITH DEMOCRATS on the rear of the Lexus.

I circled back onto Winter Street and parked several doors down from Garrett and Stearns. It was hot, and I'd eaten too much too quickly at lunch, leaving me feeling like I'd swallowed a doorknob. To help kill time I'd brought the paper along.

The big hoo-ha on the local scene involved a woman who had recently purchased waterfront property. She posted signs warning people against crossing the beach below her house, a beach that has been used by the public for as long as there's been a public. Next to it was another article about Martha's Vineyard, where a well-known movie actor had gotten into a tussle with a local man over beach access.

I have strong feelings on this issue. The beaches and waterways belong to everybody, or they should. Yet up and down the cape and islands wealthy newcomers are trying to block public access to locals who are trying to eke out a living in aquaculture or who simply want to take a walk or a swim with the kids.

I was working myself up to a letter to the editor when Garrett's sports car shot out of the lot. I played catch-up for a few blocks and fell in three cars behind him. Traffic was heavy, but I had little trouble staying with him all the way home.

Home turned out to be a modern architectural mess: overlarge, angular, superfluous square columns, triangular windows. Old joke: Why are there no architects in heaven? Because Jesus was a carpenter.

Garrett stashed the Bimmer in one side of a two-car garage and went in the house, closing the overhead door behind him. It looked as if he was home for the duration. I drove home and called it a day.

The next few days were more of the same. Garrett left early and drove to Bob's Bodyshop, an upscale gym out on 132. Then it was

office, or courthouse, lunch, office again, and home. One night he stayed at the office until nearly nine o'clock. There were no visitors.

I spent too much time sitting in the car, ate too many fast-food meals, prepared a written report for Marissa Garrett, and chafed while inertia and gravity wreaked their inexorable ruin on my body.

By nine Wednesday morning Hyannis was already staggering under the heat. Main Street was clogged with dueling Volvos. Tourists stood in breakfast lines or jostled each other for rapidly dwindling supplies of the New York *Times*. More people were arriving hourly by car, boat, and plane. All of them were seeking Old Cape Cod.

They were fifty years too late. Successive waves of realtors and developers, exhibiting all the restraint of the Visigoths sacking Rome, have transformed much of the cape into suburban sprawl or vacation-home ghettos for the wealthy. A place Patti Page wouldn't fall in love with again.

I dodged a jogger pushing a three-wheeled stroller and ducked into The Rudder. The quality of the fare served up in The Rudder can be gauged by the lack of people waiting outside and the availability of tables within. The prices, however, are commensurate with the quality of the food, which earns the place my personal four-star rating.

I sat at the counter and got some coffee. Floyd, the owner, emerged from his kitchen a minute later and joined me.

"Pass the lye, will you?" I said. "I want to sweeten this up a little."

He looked me over critically. "Is it true that when you were a lad at Halloween your parents simply ran a rubber band from one ear to the other and sent you door to door?"

I gagged down some coffee. "Yeah, and I remember that your mama was so ugly the neighbors referred to your parents as Mister and Mister."

"I'll thank you to keep Mom out of it," he said, smiling.

"What do you make out of this beach access brouhaha?" I asked.

"It's perfectly understandable, Charles. She doesn't want to look down and see riff-raff like you enjoying themselves. You should read Philip Slater's *Wealth Addiction*. He says something like 'ownership is a way of preventing others from having access to the things we want to use.' Like Howard Hughes. He used to rent a bunch of houses that he never once went to."

"I don't get it."

"Of course you don't. You're not a grasping materialist. You've taken vows of poverty. Frankly, such blatant disregard for money makes me uneasy."

I pushed my coffee away. "Well, Floyd, you'll never get rich, either, you keep serving this mud."

"If the coffee tastes like mud," he said, heading for the kitchen, "that's because it was just *ground* this morning."

At noon Garrett drove to the Centerville post office. This struck me as odd: the Hyannis branch was much closer, and traffic on 28 was horrif-

ic as usual. He got out of the car and paused, looking carefully around the parking lot before going inside.

I wondered why anyone would be furtive about entering a post office. It was an unlikely location for a tryst. After a minute or two I went in and got in line at the window. Garrett was at a table in the lobby, filling out a money order. He slid it into an envelope, dropped it in the OUT OF TOWN slot, and departed.

I purchased a book of stamps and walked over to the wastebasket. Garrett had thrown away the carbon papers. I dropped my stamps, bent over to pick them up, and retrieved the carbons at the same time. Stubblefield: master of misdirection.

Back at the office I was able to determine that the money order was made out to Earl Ramsdell of Danby, Massachusetts, in the amount of twelve hundred dollars. I put my feet up and watched the new high-speed ferry enter the harbor on its return from the islands. Gandhi once remarked that there's more to life than increasing its speed, but I doubted that the Steamship Authority concurred. Or its customers.

Why a money order? Maybe Garrett forgot his checkbook. Maybe because money orders are virtually impossible to trace, or because you can use any name you want on them. Maybe for no particular reason at all.

It was the last day of July. For the sake of argument, what if Garrett sent Earl Ramsdell twelve hundred dollars a month? That was about the amount Marissa Garrett was missing. It didn't have to be sinis-

ter, of course. Ramsdell could be an attorney to whom Garrett was farming out some busy work, like typing up parole appeals, and Ramsdell simply wished to hide the income. Hence, money orders.

That seemed a bit tenuous, but it would have to wait until I saw Ramsdell. It was hotter than the hinges of Hell and I needed a swim. I grabbed the bathing suit and towel I keep in the office and set out for the beach, making a brief stop at the library. There I found the current copy of the *Martindale-Hubbell Law Directory* for Massachusetts and looked up Garrett, Roger. No surprises there: graduated from Hanover Law School in 1996, admitted to the bar the following year.

I put the book away, put the car in gear, and put Roger Garrett out of my mind for the rest of the day.

Robert Zimpleman stepped out of his clothes and headed for the bathroom. From the kitchen below came the aroma of vegetable stir-fry and brown rice. They were smells he had come to hate.

Evie had given him an ultimatum: "Lose weight or lose me." There was some justice to her demands. He was just a few doughnuts shy of three hundred pounds, had trouble catching his breath after a flight of stairs, and could no longer easily lace his shoes. His wardrobe now included several pairs of loafers. When Evie stopped sleeping with him, he got the message, vowing to slim down.

It was proving harder than he had imagined. Food had become a habit, and he, in effect, was an addict.

Not that he was about to enroll in one of those fat farms: he harbored an instinctive distrust of shrinks and counselors of any kind. You got a problem, you take care of it yourself. That was how his father had raised him, and that was how he lived his life. And so he bought a set of weights, a treadmill, and a rowing machine, and he avoided driving past fast food joints and doughnut emporiums. He'd lost seven pounds in two weeks, a feat he deemed trivial but one that pleased Evie greatly. And he loved her. So he submitted to the bird food and the silage and the tasteless crap that only a beggar in Calcutta would find palatable, and he got on the bathroom scales morning and night to monitor his progress.

He made a game of it, leaving one foot on the floor while slowly, very slowly, shifting all his weight onto the scales, watching the dial turn and finally stop, quivering slightly, as he planted both feet on the pad.

He did the same tonight.

His goal was one pound less than last night: two eighty-nine. Slowly the dial moved. One fifty. One sixty. One seventy. He was faintly aware of Evie singing in the kitchen, of the pleasant aroma from the new bar of soap he had just opened, of a robin singing outside the window.

The dial registered two seventy-five.

Julia Larsen was watering her garden when she saw part of the Zimplemans' second floor disintegrate accompanied by a bright flash and a deafening explosion. Bits of wood and glass sheared past her,

miraculously leaving her unscathed.

When the ringing in her ears stopped she heard Evie Zimpleman screaming.

I got up early Friday and ran four miles to rid my system of excess calories and car fatigue. An hour of kata and shadowboxing and I was feeling virtuous again.

So as not to overdo it I stopped for coffee at the nearest doughnut shop, where I ran into Fran McGuire, a sergeant on the local force. We have a good working relationship, and I was curious about the headline of the day, the murder of Robert Zimpleman.

"Not my case," he said, making half an English muffin disappear. "Why are you interested?"

"I'm always interested in crimes that involve explosives."

"That's right. You were mixed up in that booby-trap case over at Royal Oaks Country Club, weren't you?"

I nodded.

"You'll like this, then. It was a variation of the clock mechanism device using a bathroom scale. The bomb was wired to go off at a certain weight. Zimpleman was double-gutted, around three hundred according to his wife. So the killer sets the thing for, say, two fifty, two sixty."

"He could have gotten the wife by accident."

The other half of the muffin followed the first. "Nah, she's a little bit of a thing, about one ten, one fifteen. You ever notice that?"

"Notice what?"

"How a lot of women take care of

themselves and their husbands let themselves turn into blivets?"

"How did the bomber gain access?"

"Neighbor says she saw a carpenter working on the house yesterday while the Zimplemans were at work. Guy had a tool pouch, ladder, pickup truck—everything seemed copacetic, she didn't pay it any mind."

"What was the explosive?"

McGuire signaled the waitress, pointing at his empty plate for a refill.

"Well, that's where things get interesting. The bomber used Tovex."

"What's interesting?"

"Here's what. First thing this morning a statie comes by to see Reis, who caught the case. Seems that just a few days ago some guy name of Ives up in Vermont got blown up with Tovex. They believe the charge was delivered in a remote-control model car. And," he raised both forefingers, "Ives was a lawyer, like Zimpleman."

"Connection?"

"Hell if I know. Too early, and as I say, not my case. Which reminds me—you didn't hear any of this from me."

"Any of what?"

Marissa Garrett was waiting, as arranged, at Caffè e Dolci, a coffee-shop on Main that has great coffee and even better tiramisu. She was nursing an iced latte and looked as if she hadn't slept well. I handed her my written report.

"Not much there, Mrs. Garrett, which is good news."

She relaxed upon hearing that.

"All the same, I'd like you to continue for a bit longer. To be sure."

"All right, but another week and I think you should reassess the situation. This can get expensive."

"I make quite a bit of money. And I need to know."

I could hear the last square of tiramisu, inside its glass case, softly calling my name. I ignored it.

"Isn't that awful about Bob Zimpleman? I don't think I've ever seen Roger so upset about anything."

"Did he know Zimpleman?"

"Oh yes. They went to law school together. Were roommates, in fact."

"At Hanover Law?"

She nodded. "Along with two others. They rented a house, to share expenses, you see."

"Does Roger have a theory about who would want to kill Zimpleman?"

"He didn't want to talk about it. He didn't even finish his breakfast, just left for the gym without even saying goodbye. I know how upsetting this must be for him, although the truth is that they haven't been close since college. I don't believe they've gotten together at all except for those reunions in Atlantic City."

"Do you know who the other two roommates were?"

"Surely. Michael Stalb and Richie Ives."

There's a feeling I get in the pit of my stomach when I hear bad news. It was there now.

"Do you know where Ives is?"

"I lost track of the others after Roger graduated and we were married, but I believe Richie moved to Maine or Vermont. Michael dropped

out of law school in his last year. Financial difficulties, I think Roger said."

"One other thing," I said, getting up to leave. "Where is Hanover College?"

"In west-central Massachusetts, in the town of Danby."

I gassed up the car and placed a call to Fran McGuire at the Hyannis P.D. asking if Ives's first name had been Richard. After a few minutes he came back on to say that it was and why did I want to know? I said I'd be in touch and rang off.

The Victory Garden was a pretentious little eatery on Danby's Main Street. It appeared to cater to the college trade, which this time of year consisted of schoolteachers taking summer courses. The waitress was a statuesque redhead wearing a T-shirt that said WE PUT ONE MAN ON THE MOON, WHY NOT ALL OF THEM? When she brought the ticket for my hummus sandwich, I asked if she knew Earl Ramsdell.

"Uh-uh. Student?"

"Townie," I guessed.

She pointed up the street. "Try Castner's. Someone in there'll probably know him."

The bartender in Castner's managed to tear herself away from her soap opera long enough to draw me a beer. "I'm looking for an old friend," I said. "Earl Ramsdell. He been in lately?"

There was only one other patron, a scrofulous number in green workclothes drinking depth charges. He nearly choked on his drink when I asked the bartender about Ramsdell.

"Never heard of him," she said, turning away.

"How about you?" I asked the subchaser. "Seen Earl?"

He eyed me the way a snake eyes a baby bird.

"Hot today," he said, gently tapping his glass against the bar. I signaled the bartender to give him another, which seemed to irritate her no end.

"You're an old friend of Earl's," he said when the drink arrived.

"Yep."

"Bushwah! Earl ain't got no old friends. Got no young ones neither." He positioned the shot of whisky over the mouth of his beer glass and dropped it in. "Bombs away!" he said, licking drops of beer off his fingers. "Earl don't come in here no more, not for a long time. A little too good for us, eh, Carol?"

"You talk too much," said Carol.

"Earl 'n' me was born and raised here, bub. Now, I never seen you before in my life, so you tell me when it was you were his old friend."

There was nothing for it but the truth.

"Okay, I'm a private investigator."

"Earl in trouble, is he?" The prospect of Earl in hot water seemed to brighten his day right up.

"No, I just need to ask him a couple of questions. Know where I can find him?"

"Hard to say."

I got the bartender's attention again and pointed. It was barely one o'clock, and this was his third boilermaker in quick succession. I wondered how many he'd had before I arrived. I also wondered why he didn't just fall senseless to the floor.

"Earl inherited from an uncle and bought himself a fancy spread out toward Poolville. Now that he's a man of means, we don't see him in here. Probably has his likker flown in from Paris, or some such."

"What did he do before?"

"Worked on the maintenance crew up to the school, just like the rest of us." He downed some of his drink. "Screw him."

Another drink got me directions to Earl's "spread," and half an hour later I eased up a long gravel drive to a nouveau log cabin set on top of a hill with a spectacular view of surrounding countryside. The yard was dominated by a large satellite dish. A new red pickup truck was parked by a toolshed. Beyond it was an in-ground swimming pool. There was no evidence of livestock, farm machinery, or crops.

For a few minutes I took in the view. To the west the Berkshires wavered in the haze. Meadowlarks sang from a field, and a red-tail circled lazily, looking for lunch. It was a nice spot, remote, tranquil, close to what matters.

I climbed the porch stairs. The smell hit me before I reached the door. Earl Ramsdell—I assumed—was wired to a kitchen chair with coat hangers. Judging from the swelling of the body and the blisters on his skin, I guessed that he'd been dead at least a week, maybe more. It looked like someone had had a few questions for Earl, and when he was done asking them, he'd put a bullet in his brain.

The smell and the insects drove me out after a quick inspection that revealed nothing. I've seen death in

many forms, but I've never gotten used to it. It's always a shock and always an affront to the living. Ramsdell may have been a querulous and friendless man, but he didn't deserve to go out like this. Nobody does.

I stood in the yard to clear the stench of death from my nostrils, and I tried to put it together. The only thing that made sense was blackmail. That would explain Ramsdell's newfound wealth, and his death perhaps. He'd had something on Roger Garrett. Did he have something on Ives and Zimpleman, too? The same something? That would provide a strong motive for one of them to kill him. But then who was killing the lawyers, and why?

I didn't want to get tangled up with the local law, so I stopped at a phone booth and called in an anonymous tip to the state police about Ramsdell. Then I called Sergeant Reis in Hyannis and told him enough to convince him that Garrett was in danger.

I stopped once more in Danby. The Hanover College library had a shelf filled with yearbooks going back to the days when students drove boat-tail Auburns and wore raccoon coats. I found Michael Stalb in the 1995 edition, hometown New Bedford. I jotted that down and headed home.

Lieutenant Eddie Olivera was talking.

"We had a chat with Garrett after you called. Says he can't imagine why anyone would want to kill Bob Zimpleman. And he was pret-

ty convincing until we dropped Richard Ives on him. That shook him good. He still won't talk, though. God, I hate a liar!" He folded his bricklike hands on the desk.

I knew that a few years ago a thug had made the mistake of going for Eddie with a knife in each hand. Eddie had simply caught both the man's wrists and crushed them.

"What about Stalb?" I said.

"Reis interviewed his mother over the phone. He dropped out of school, told her he no longer wanted to be a lawyer, and disappeared. No contact since." He leaned back and rubbed his eyes.

"All right. We're watching Garrett's house by day and his office by night as best we can, which, given our manpower, isn't great. I'd consider it a favor if you'd try to locate Stalb. He may already be dead but if not he needs a heads-up, and we'd like to interview him. Now I'll tell you something *you* don't know.

"We received a call from the Hampshire County sheriff's office earlier. Not about Ramsdell—we'll keep you out of that for now. It seems they got a call from a lockup in Texas. Somebody out there was following up on one Jerome Kersey. Seems that back in '96 Kersey was living in Hampshire County. He got juiced one night and ran down and killed a pedestrian, a young girl, then fled the scene. They arrested him the next day. He claimed that he'd been at home drinking with a buddy, had passed out, and never left the apartment. The buddy denied that, and anyway Kersey had a string of OUI's, so he went down on vehicular homicide, leaving the

scene, et cetera. Because of jail overcrowding they shipped him off to Texas. And here's where it gets cute.

"About a month ago someone claiming to be a deputy sheriff from Hampshire shows up in Texas with an order to rendite Kersey back to Massachusetts. He told them that Kersey had hired a new attorney who was starting an appeal process—something about the sleazebag's being denied a preliminary hearing at his original trial or some such legalistic garbage—and the case had been remanded to Hampshire county court. So they turned him over."

"They didn't check it out first?"

"Nah. Guy had what appeared to be proper credentials, and anyway it's not an unusual procedure. Kersey, of course, disappeared into the ether. If someone hadn't bothered to follow it up—"

"What's the connection?"

"Guess where Kersey was living when he killed the girl?"

"Danby?"

"You got it. I'm not sure how it all fits yet. Maybe you find Stalb we can learn something."

Andrea Stalb lived on the bottom floor of a three-decker just off 195. She was a slight, fiftyish woman in whose face were etched permanent worry lines. She was also no stranger to physical labor; I'd caught her between her job as a motel chambermaid and her shift as a waitress.

"I told the policeman who called that I don't know where Michael is. I'm worried sick now. He wouldn't tell me what it was about, he just said he wanted to ask Michael some

questions. What's going on? Has Michael done something wrong?"

"I don't think so, Mrs. Stalb. He may have information helpful to the police concerning another matter."

"Well, as I said, I have no idea where he went. He hasn't seen fit even to call me and let me know he's all right. And that isn't like him at all. He was always a very considerate boy."

"Why did he drop out of law school?"

She made minute adjustments to her apricot and white waitress uniform, checked her hair in the mirror. "I don't know. I never could understand it. He came home one day, said he wasn't cut out for a career in law, and two days later he left. I haven't heard a word from him since. All his work, his schooling, the money—all wasted."

"Do you think he might have been in trouble?"

"No. But he was *troubled*. Something was wrong, I don't know what, but I could tell. When I asked him, he just shut me out."

"Do you have any idea where he might have gone? A girlfriend, a job, the military?"

She shook her head.

"Can I look at his room?"

"Why would you want to do that?"

I shrugged. "It's unlikely, but maybe something there will give me a lead on him."

"I can't imagine what." She checked her watch. "Very well, but only for a minute. I have to be at the restaurant at two." She led me to a small bedroom that was now being used as a workspace. "A few of Michael's things are still here, but

I've been getting rid of them. I need the space for my seamstress work."

Three jobs! No wonder she looked tired. I was getting weary just imagining her day. There was a Red Sox pennant and a couple of rock music posters on one wall, a large star map on another. A bag of golf clubs stood in the corner, and a telescope, its tripod folded, lay on the bed.

"Michael was an astronomy nut," she said. "I haven't sold the telescope yet because he worked so very hard for it and I thought someday he might want it again."

There were several cardboard boxes with back issues of *Amateur Astronomer* magazine and astronomy texts. His few possessions looked forlorn, covered with dust and neglect.

I thanked Andrea Stalb and pointed the car back to the cape, wondering if Michael Stalb was still alive and, if so, for how long.

The next morning was overcast and muggy with a threat of rain. The office smelled like some wild animal's lair. I opened the windows and fired up the coffeemaker while I read the paper.

Roger Garrett's name was not splashed all over the front page, which was a relief. A front page article cheerfully reported that property was selling well above the initial asking prices, thanks in part to realtors who were encouraging bidding wars among hordes of wealthy purchasers. Just below the fold was a series of interviews with frustrated retailers unable to find summer help. The help, it seems, can no longer afford to live here.

Neither can some year-rounders. There was a photo of a woman and her three kids who were being evicted. The house they'd lived in for several years had been sold by its absentee owner to someone who would probably use it for eight weeks of the year.

Not wanting to know more, I turned the page and skimmed the daily horoscope, "Starwise." I was advised to placate my boss (I have none), watch my finances (ditto), and tonight to "cocoon." Right.

Stars. That gave me an idea. The newsstand had the current issue of *Amateur Astronomer*. I took it back to the office and dialed the number for subscription information. A woman asked how she could assist me.

"This is Jack Bradley calling from Stetco Optics. I wonder if you can help me. We sold a telescope to a Mr. Michael Stalb not long ago. He mentioned that he saw our ad in your magazine. Here's the problem. We have experienced a flaw in some of the focusing mechanisms in the model that Mr. Stalb purchased and naturally we're recalling them. Not a widespread problem, I assure you, but we are contacting everyone who purchased a telescope from that batch for free repairs, if needed. We've attempted to reach Mr. Stalb but without any success. Perhaps he is a subscriber to *Amateur Astronomer*?"

She said she would be happy to check. I was put on hold so I could listen to music apparently played by lobotomy patients.

"Yes, Mr. Bradley. Michael Stalb is a subscriber." She read me an ad-

dress, a post office box in Glendale, New York. I thanked her, rang off, and hauled out the road atlas. Glendale was a town of twenty thousand located near the Finger Lakes region in central New York.

Travel time.

Glendale wasn't much to look at, a backwater whose Main Street was moribund, the shoppers long ago lured to outlying malls; whose children finished high school, took a look around, and headed up the interstate to college or a job, never to return; a quiet town except perhaps on Saturday night when the farm boys rode in to drink and hit each other with pool cues. A town with roots in the past but no foreseeable future except more of the same.

Michael Stalb was not listed in the phone book. I could probably have found him by digging through records in the courthouse, but it was a beautiful day. I decided to make what is known in the trade as discreet inquiries.

The Local sat between two vacant storefronts. After a seven hour drive I was hungry. According to the menu I could get the early bird roast pork special with salad, bread, and vegetables for the price of one of Billingsgate's appetizers.

Tammy was my waitress. She wore the universal apricot and white uniform and brought me enough food for two lumberjacks. I asked if she knew Stalb.

Her face lit up. "Michael, sure."

I said, "I haven't seen him in a dog's age. Do you know where I might catch up with him?"

Tammy consulted a Felix the Cat

wristwatch. "He's probably over at the soup kitchen getting ready for the dinner crowd. He's done wonders over there, you know. He writes grants for them and got a new van for delivering food and coffee in the cold months, and he's real good at getting people to contribute food and gloves and overcoats, like that."

It was a short walk to the soup kitchen. Groups of smokers stood on the sidewalk, now and then checking the clock on a nearby bell tower.

At five thirty a young woman opened the door, and when the patrons had all filed in, I approached and asked to see Stalb.

"I'm Michael," said a voice behind her. Stalb stepped out onto the sidewalk and gave me the once-over. "Do I know you?"

"No, but I need to talk with you. It can wait until you're done here."

"What's it all about?"

I looked at the woman.

"Go ahead," she said. "Jody and I can handle it."

There was a park across the street. Stalb and I sat on a bench near an ornate fountain. Across from us stood a wall bearing metal plaques commemorating Glendale County's war dead. The first plaque was for the Civil War, the last, Vietnam. There were a lot of names, too many for so small an area.

"Who are you, and what's on your mind?" asked Stalb.

He was a short, spare man with a lot of curly black hair and a neatly trimmed beard. I sensed tension and, more than that, weariness, as if he had long expected such a visit and was resigned to it.

"Richard Ives and Robert Zimpleman," I said. "And Roger Garrett."

He gazed at the cupola atop the courthouse. "What about them?"

"Ives and Zimpleman are dead."

Stalb's head snapped around.

"They were murdered. I thought you might be able to tell me why."

He leaned back and closed his eyes. I waited. The waning sun lit up the green cupola. Pigeons were homing in to roost on nearby church steeples. Two boys were playing catch on the grass beneath the maples. We were on Norman Rockwell time.

"How much do you know?" he asked.

"I know something happened three years ago in Danby that involved Jerome Kersey and the four of you. Kersey's out of jail, and your old roommates are dying."

"Kersey didn't do anything."

"He ran down and killed a young girl."

"No, he didn't. We did." He let out a deep breath.

"It was Roger's idea. We'd had a few drinks, and he said how can we be criminal lawyers? We really don't know anything about crime, we've never committed a crime, or something along those lines. Complete nonsense, of course, but we got into it, and the end result was we decided to steal a car. I can't explain why. We were young, stupid, inexperienced—we just did it. And we screwed up."

"Ran down the girl."

"Yes. It was raining, we'd been drinking, Roger was driving like a wild man. The girl was walking on the shoulder of the road. Roger lost control of the car and hit her. We

panicked—she was dead—and we ditched the car, wiped our prints as best we could, and walked back to the house.”

“Why didn’t you call the cops?”

“Christ. She was dead, and we were scared witless. All we could see was going to jail, our lives and our careers over before they even began. And the next day they arrested Kersey.

“We spent the whole day arguing about what to do. Richie and I wanted to go to the police and confess. Roger and Bob were adamantly opposed. Especially Roger. He had the most to lose, since he was driving.”

He got up and walked over to the fountain.

“Richie and I folded. You have to understand—a lot of sacrifices were made for me. My father died when I was two. My mother worked all these jobs to support us. When I was accepted at college, and then law school, the community chipped in to help: scholarship funds, discounts on clothes and books. Hell, Artie Truman even donated a late-model used car. Not to mention the scholarship money from the college. And here I was, a fool, letting them down, shaming my mother. I just couldn’t face it. I know it was wrong, but I *could not do it*.”

He slumped down on the cement wall that contained the reflecting pool and put his head in his hands.

“Roger kept saying that Kersey was just a rummy, the town drunk, which was true. Nobody gave a damn about him. And the four of us—we made a lot of sanctimonious noises about that poor girl, but we

didn’t give a damn about her, did we? God, I feel like such a coward.”

“You weren’t responsible for the girl’s death, Michael.”

He laughed at that, a short, harsh sound.

“Right. Just an accessory to manslaughter. And to letting an innocent man go to jail. How could I presume to represent the law after that? I had to leave.”

“And this?” I gestured at the town behind us. “Penance?”

“I guess you could say that, but nothing will ever make it right.”

The church bells started in at six, scattering pigeons like gray clouds.

“Michael, did you ever hear the name Earl Ramsdell when you lived in Danby?”

He thought for a minute.

“I believe that name came up. Yeah, Kersey claimed a guy named Ramsdell had been drinking with him that night and could provide him with an alibi. I don’t remember hearing any more about it, so I guess there was nothing to it. Why?”

“I think Ramsdell saw you steal the car that night—maybe he’d stepped out for some air or had gone to get more booze—and figuring you were students, he already had a little blackmail in mind. But when they arrested Kersey for killing the girl, Ramsdell realized he’d hit the jackpot: four future lawyers who would pay dearly to keep this covered up. He identified you, probably from your pictures in the yearbook, and then he bided his time, kept track of the others—you were gone—and brought the pressure to bear after they began practicing law. That’s how Kersey got onto you: he

got your names from Ramsdell, before he killed him."

"Oh, man. Him too?"

I nodded. "You'd better start taking precautions."

"Why? Nobody knows where I am. He'll never find me."

"I did."

He stirred the water in the pool, fracturing the reflection of the courthouse.

"Then he finds me."

"If he does, he'll kill you."

Bleakly: "Yeah."

The dying sun fired the hillsides east of the city. A line of cows plodded homeward down one of them. Above us the nasal cries of the night-hawks circling and swooping in pursuit of prey.

There was nothing more to say. I left him there, bent over as if he were bearing a granite slab on his thin shoulders.

I dumped it on Eddie Olivera. It didn't concern me any more. Garrett would have to explain the situation to his wife. I sure wasn't going to do it.

As for who sprung Kersey, and why, that will be a matter for conjecture until, and if, Kersey is apprehended. It was a friend, probably, who became suspicious of Ramsdell's refusal to appear as a witness

for Kersey and of his sudden wealth. Kersey's first step had been to visit the log cabin: the truth, then revenge. He had gone after the others quickly and decisively. Roger Garrett was lucky to be alive.

It was a messy affair, and nobody could claim the moral high ground. Maybe Kersey could have if he'd simply gotten the truth and taken it to the authorities. On the other hand, after what he'd been through, recourse to the authorities might not have seemed a promising option, especially since Ramsdell could still refuse to testify in order to rid himself of Kersey again and preserve his blackmail operation.

I thought about Roger Garrett's future. There was a BOLO—"be on the lookout for"—for Kersey in effect throughout New England, but that probably wasn't much consolation. After all, how many objects that we deal with every day can be converted to bombs? Clocks, speedometers, doorknobs, telephones—almost anything. And Kersey showed considerable resourcefulness. After a while that kind of fear can become debilitating.

Maybe Kersey is through, then, satisfied that neither Garrett nor Stalb will ever draw an easy breath again.

Or maybe he's just waiting.

Le Pigeon

DeLoris Stanton Forbes

Paris—in the spring, the perfect honeymoon, said her maid of honor. “Ooooh, yes,” chorused her bridesmaids. Jonathan, her new husband, said, “I can’t wait—Folies-Bergère, here I come.” “It’s not pronounced follies bergery,” said Sue Nan, the bride. “Maybe we should have a few French lessons before we go.” “Don’t be a jerk,” said Jonathan. “The whole world speaks English, they got to.”

The city stunned her with its elegance. It looked, she thought, like some fabulous *Masterpiece Theatre* set, only it looked too I-have-always-been-here to be pretend. Paris was real. She fell in love with it.

Jonathan wasn’t so taken with the City of Lights. He had trouble with the language, and although the Folies-Bergère presented an exciting show, he said he’d seen just as good if not better in Las Vegas. She wanted to visit the Louvre, he wanted to stay in bed. She went to the Louvre and left him to it. The Louvre was so vast, its treasures so varied, she lost track of the time, and before she realized it, she’d quite lost the noon hour. Her watch told her it was after two, and she belatedly remembered she had a husband waiting for her back at the hotel. But Jonathan had risen and gone by the time she reached the Hôtel Meurice. Gone where? Who knew?

Very well, thought Sue Nan. She would go back to the Louvre—she hadn’t even seen the *Mona Lisa* yet! But first some lunch? Perhaps a sidewalk café? All her life she’d read about Paris’s sidewalk cafés. Hemingway had written about them, hadn’t he, and F. Scott Fitzgerald? All those romantic old writers from the twenties and thirties; she’d read their books and dreamed.

She walked along the rue de Rivoli, and finding no sidewalk cafés, she continued on past the place de la Concorde and along the Champs Elysées—what a beautiful wide avenue, oh, Jonathan, look at all you’re missing! Where have you gone, oh where, oh where has my little dog gone . . . Sorry, Jonathan, but you were not exactly my choice, you know. Daddy was the one who thought you’d be the perfect son-in-law, so he bought me a Jonathan.

At last she found what she sought on a side street, a nice little place with an empty white-clothed table. She sank gratefully into a chair. Her feet hurt, how far had she walked? Miles. That was the trouble with Paris, so much to see, so much to do, but now a glass of wine, “*Blanc, s’il vous plait*,” and perhaps some escargot . . . ummm, yes, yummy.

She sipped and ate, got dreamy-eyed there at the café on a sunny af-

ternoon; the drone of traffic from the Champs Elysées seemed far away. There was a pigeon across the street on the sidewalk doing some kind of pigeon dance, wheeling around like a dervish, a feathered pinwheel, spinning, spinning, gracious, did he have a damaged wing? Was that why he was moving so drunkenly? And as she watched, he spun again and disappeared into a depression just off the sidewalk. She waited expectantly, but the pigeon didn't reemerge. Sue Nan rose, motioned to the waiter: "I'll be right back, it's a pigeon . . ." And she hurried across the street.

The depression the pigeon had fallen into was a circular excavation dug, she thought, for some sort of a large pipe. There were other such circular holes, some larger, in the same area, awaiting, she assumed, pillars, big round pillars. She peered into the hole she thought the pigeon had fallen into, could see nothing (it must be a very deep hole) but thought she could hear him whirling around down there in the darkness. Oh, poor pigeon. Poor, poor pigeon down there in the darkness, she must find someone to get him out!

The garçon at the sidewalk café helped her get a gendarme. He obviously understood the word gendarme even if her explanation about the plight of the pigeon seemed more Greek than French or even English to him. She had her little French-English dictionary in hand when he arrived, looking exactly as a gendarme should look—the small mustache, the cap at the proper angle. The word fell in her dictionary was translated as *abattre*, so she said, "*Secours, monsieur, le pigeon abattre là-bas*," a sentence which, she hoped, relayed the information that she needed help for a pigeon who had fallen down a hole.

The gendarme frowned, looked to the waiter, who shrugged his shoulders in that Gallic way, so she repeated herself, more loudly this time, and finally in desperation she reverted to English. "A poor little pigeon, he's hurt, fell down one of those holes. Across the street. He'll die down there if someone doesn't get him out!"

Gendarme and waiter looked at one another, more shrugs, more French spoken so quickly that she couldn't make out a word until at last the gendarme said, "Pigeon?"

"Yes, yes! *Oui!* Come with me, please." And she dragged him across the street to the excavations. The waiter came, too, and they stood looking at the hole as she acted out the pigeon, the wheeling, the turning, the falling. "Ahh," said the gendarme. "Ahh," echoed the waiter. "*Le pigeon. Mais oui.*" The gendarme was nodding his head. "*Ici?*" pointing at the hole. "Yes, yes, there!" She stood waiting.

The gendarme looked at the waiter and the waiter looked at the gendarme and finally she riffled through her dictionary, came up with "*Rapide!*" Nobody moved. "*Rapide,*" she repeated vehemently. She stamped her foot.

"*Madame,*" the gendarme was sweetly patient, "*c'est impossible.*"

"And that's all he would say," she fumed as she related her experiences to a returned Jonathan from somewhere—where? "That's how I spent my afternoon, trying to save the life of a poor pathetic pigeon, oh, it is so frustrating to be unable to speak the language! Meanwhile, where were you?"

"Looking for you, sugar. 'Bout wore my poor feet out running around that Louver; no wonder I missed you, honeybun."

Sugar? Honeybun? What had he been up to? "Did you see the *Mona Lisa*?"

"Sure did. Had her hanging right inside the door, you know. Personally I figure you're a lot better looking, we ought to get one of those portrait painters to paint a picture of you. I just might suggest it to your daddy."

That did it. "Come on, Jonathan. We're going to go save that poor pigeon."

He protested, he said it was time for cocktails, have a little bed-fun time together and then a nap before dinner, said there wasn't anything he could do if the gendarme hadn't been able to do anything, and while she mentally agreed with that, she insisted; he needed punishment for something, she wasn't sure what, but something!

They took a taxi. She remembered the name of the street, the rue de Bassano and the Champs Elysées was where they wanted to go and—miracle of miracles—he understood her French and took them there. She waited for Jonathan to pay him, but he couldn't figure out the francs so she took over. "Here," she said when the cab had gone, "right down this hole. Get down and see if you can see him. He must be terrified, poor pigeon. Trapped in he doesn't know what for no reason, nothing but blackness, maybe even no air . . ."

Jonathan exploded. "You're nuts, you know that? Pigeons! No-good pigeons! Everybody always said that Sue Nan Ellington was missing some cards in her deck, but I never really believed it till now. What the devil do you think I can do to get that no-good pigeon out of that hole? There ain't nothing I can do, that's what, and I tell you this: I don't care how much money your daddy paid me to marry you, right now I feel like sending you back in a package marked junk mail, return to sender!"

Sue Nan took a deep breath before she flailed out at him. She was taller and heavier, stronger physically, and he retreated, arms above his head to protect his handsome face. She realized then and there that she'd never liked him, not one little bit, that she really hated him and all the boys her daddy'd trotted out for her, and her blows increased in fury until suddenly he disappeared from sight.

He'd fallen down a hole like the pigeon, he'd tripped on the edge of one of the big holes, and just like that he was gone. He gave one cry like a banshee as he went down and that was all.

She looked around. The street was empty. It was that time of day

when Parisians were at home getting ready to come out again. Even the café across the street was unoccupied—except for the waiter. She ran across, tugged at his sleeve, and gestured, “Help! *Secours . . .* my husband, he has fallen down a hole—over there!”

The waiter looked at her, smiled at her. “Ah, madame,” he said nodding his head. “*Oui, madame, je comprends. Le pigeon!*”

“No, no,” she protested, “my husband . . .” What was the French word for husband anyway? She couldn’t remember, not for the life of her, not for the life of him, not for the life of that gross, two-legged, uncivilized, uncultured, pretty to look at, ugly to know beast she’d been sentenced to spend the rest of her life with . . . so she gave up and said, “You’re right, *garçon, le pigeon. C’est fini.*”

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Honor Among Thieves

B. K. Stevens

The first time it happened, it was just barely a crime. It started as an honest mistake, and she simply didn't correct it.

Mary had noticed the woman at the Gourmet Meats counter. A walking cliché, she'd thought—the ankle-length leather coat, the salon-sculpted hair, the piled-on rings and bracelets that would have been too much for an opera house, let alone a grocery store. And the loud, strident voice, scolding an apologetic butcher because the chops he'd sold her last week had been too fatty, the steaks too lean. She's a parody of a rich woman, Mary thought—an arrogant, overdressed, rude parody. And she's buying steaks and chops. Mary felt the resentment rising. On another day she would have forced it down; today she couldn't be bothered. She looked away from the woman and considered her options. No, the eighty percent lean ground beef was too high. She chose a sausage-like roll of Hamburger Plus—traces of beef ground with soybeans and artificial colorings and God knew what else—and moved on.

A box of rice, a jar of generic peanut butter, a loaf of day-old bread, and she checked out, pleased she'd managed to fill three bags for just thirty-seven dollars and fifty-four cents. A clerk pushed her cart out to the pickup spot while she went to get her car. There was the leather-

coated woman standing by a BMW, chatting with a woman who had just stepped out of a Lincoln. She glanced at Mary, surveying her from scarf to shoes, then sneered and turned back to her companion. Blushing, furious, Mary got into her car. She pulled up to the pickup spot and saw that no one was on hand to help customers with groceries. Well, on such a cold day, she couldn't blame the clerks for finding excuses to stay inside.

She spotted the cart with the three bags, opened her trunk, and started loading up. Only as she lifted the last bag from the cart did she notice the packages wrapped in butcher paper. This can't be my cart, she thought, and began to put the bag back. Then she glanced at the parking lot and saw the leather-coated woman still locked in conversation. There were no other carts around—these must be *her* groceries. Later Mary wouldn't be able to remember making a decision, just the phrase "screw it" flashing through her mind. She set the last bag next to the others, slammed her trunk, and drove away.

Panic seized her a block from the store. My God, she thought. What have I done? Fearfully she checked her rear view mirror, expecting to see police cars bearing down on her. There was no one. I'll go back, she decided. I'll apologize, say I made a

mistake and just realized it. But who would believe she'd realized such a mistake while driving away, and how could she tell such a lie without blushing? She'd be arrested for attempted robbery or attempted burglary or whatever it was she'd done. Her apartment building was now minutes away. Sharply, she turned down a side street to give herself time to think—and, she realized guiltily, to throw off pursuers.

Luckily, she'd paid cash for her groceries, so no one could use a check to track her down. And she seldom shopped at that store, so none of the clerks knew her. Probably the leather-coated woman was screaming at the managers right now. Probably they'd already offered to replace her groceries for free. Probably Mary could get away with this.

But did she want to? She drove for another fifteen minutes, turning down streets almost at random, trying to force herself to think clearly. It might be safe to go back now—she could say she discovered her mistake when she got to her apartment, and that might sound believable. But even if the store didn't press charges, people would suspect the truth. It'd be humiliating, unbearable. And really, how much could any three bags of groceries be worth? Maybe forty, fifty dollars more than the bags Mary had left behind. The store could absorb the difference; it probably overcharged its customers anyhow. And after all, it *should* be more careful about having someone watch the pickup spot. This whole thing had been the

store's fault more than Mary's—maybe now it would be more responsible. All in all, it was best just to go home and deal with the guilt—and, she thought, almost smiling, put the groceries to good use.

By the time her sister came by for dinner, the kitchen was warm with rich, unfamiliar aromas. "My goodness," Ginny said, sniffing. "What are you cooking?"

"Oyster stew." Mary turned away from the stove happily. "Fresh oysters, real cream, real butter. And there's a standing rib roast in the oven and fresh asparagus in the fridge and a bottle of pinot noir on the table—I don't think you're supposed to chill red wine, are you?"

Ginny looked stunned. "Roast, oysters, wine—oh, Mary! Congratulations! You got the promotion!"

"No." Mary's smile faltered. "I got passed over again, for that bootlicking Mark Carlson. Mark Carlson! He doesn't even have a college degree, you can't talk to him five minutes without realizing what a dope he is, all he does all day is steal my ideas and play up to Mr. Boyd and laugh at his stupid jokes, and *he* gets the promotion. Mark's got leadership potential, Boyd says. Mark gets noticed. I'm a steady little worker, Boyd says, but I don't have pizzazz. I'm better off in a support position."

"I don't understand." Ginny frowned in confusion. "If Mark got the promotion, why—oh, Mary. You didn't quit and blow your severance check on all this stuff, did you?"

"No," Mary said, taking a tray from the refrigerator. "Much as I'd

have loved to, I didn't dare quit. And I didn't exactly buy all this stuff. I'll pour you some scotch—did I mention that I have scotch?—and tell you about it. Have some caviar and foie gras, and don't skimp. That's the problem with these big cuts of beef—they take forever to cook. We'd better load up on appetizers. Now, where *did* I put those quails' eggs?"

When Ginny heard about what had happened at the store, she needed a second scotch. "I don't believe you, Mary. You actually stole that poor woman's groceries?"

"She isn't a poor woman, Ginny. She was wearing a leather coat, and practically every inch of her that wasn't covered in leather was layered with jewelry. And poor women don't spend two hundred and three dollars and eighty-six cents on gourmet treats. Would you have *believed* anyone could spend that much on just three bags of groceries? Anyway, I'm sure the store made it up to her, and the store can afford it. You should see what they charge for eighty percent lean hamburger."

"Yes, and now we know one reason prices are so high," Ginny said grimly. "Because stores have to cover for what they lose to thieves. Besides, it isn't so much a question of what that woman can afford, or of what the store can afford. It's a question of what you did, of the kind of person you are. You stole, Mary, and that just isn't right. You've always been an honest person, and honest people just don't steal."

"I know," Mary said soberly. "But it was so tempting—the stuff was right in my hands, and no one was

looking. And I was so angry—I don't know exactly why, but I was. And it happened so fast. I didn't even think about what I was doing; I just did it. Afterwards I felt awful. I kept expecting the cops to come pound on the door. I threw the butcher paper in the incinerator and rewrapped the meat in tinfoil, to try to hide the evidence. And I cried. I felt so bad about what I'd done that I broke down and cried."

But she'd also gasped with delight, Mary remembered, when she had unpacked the groceries, stacking one wonderful thing after another on the counter, hardly able to believe it all belonged to her. And she'd laughed out loud when she'd found the cash register receipt. Two hundred three dollars and eighty-six cents! Two hundred three dollars and eighty-six cents' worth of groceries! She'd never had anything like it in the apartment before.

Ginny eyed her closely. "You'll never do it again, will you?"

"Of course not!" She was amazed Ginny could ask. "Believe me, I was never so scared in my life. I'll never even dare go to that store again, and of course I'll never take anything again. I gave in to temptation once, but I'm still an honest person."

"I hope so. You don't want to end up like that."

Portentously, Ginny pointed to a newspaper on the coffee table. Mary laughed.

"The Vincenti trial? Come on, Ginny. I half-accidentally take a few bags of groceries, and you think I'll end up a mobster? Thanks a bunch. I'm not beginning a life of crime. Crusading young District Attorney

Jim Newgate will have no reason to prosecute me for racketeering."

Ginny blushed.

"I didn't mean that," she said. "It's just that sometimes one thing leads to another, and—oh, forget it. You made one mistake, and that's that. I *am* sorry Mark Carlson got the promotion. Was he obnoxious about it?"

"He is obnoxious about everything." Mary drained her glass. "Naturally he lorded it over me all day. And he's throwing a big party at his place on Friday night to celebrate. He's invited the Boyds, of course, and everyone else from the office. He was even gracious enough to include me: I'm not going."

"You'd better," Ginny said. "You don't want to look like a poor sport. And it's a chance to get to know Mr. Boyd better."

"To play up to him, you mean, and tell him how smart and funny he is. No. I will not try to get ahead that way. I may not be above lifting groceries, but I'm definitely above *that*."

She did go to Mark Carlson's party, though—Ginny convinced her it was a prudent move. So she accepted a glass of Mark's imported champagne, joined in the toasts to his success, made herself smile politely at Mr. Boyd's lamely off-color jokes while everyone else roared and chorled. Then she retreated to a corner and eyed Mark's living room enviously. Just look at this place, she thought. Look at these carpets, that furniture, those paintings. Mark didn't even *need* this promotion. He must be from a rich family. The extra three hundred a month won't

make a noticeable blip in his bank account, and it would have meant the world to me. And I *earned* that promotion. I've worked at that office longer than Mark, I work harder, I work better, I—

"Well, hi, Mary." Mr. Boyd wedged himself next to her, his breath thick with something stronger than champagne. "Here you are, hiding in a corner again. It's the same mistake you make at work. You're a pretty girl—*very* pretty in your mousy little way—but you always manage to fade into the background. You should put yourself forward more, be more like Mark."

He pointed and she looked. There was Mark Carlson in the middle of the room, back-slapping, hand-shaking, head-nodding, being a jerk. She forced her mouth into a near-smile. "Mark and I have different personalities, Mr. Boyd. But I *did* come up with the concept for the Bradford account, and if you look at the figures from last quarter, you'll see that—"

"I'd rather look at *this* figure." Mr. Boyd let his gaze run over her frankly, bust to waist to hips. He nudged against her, laughed when she jumped back. "Mary, Mary, Mary. You're a steady little worker, but if you wanna get ahead, you gotta have something extra or *do* something extra, y'know? You don't have Mark's personality? Fine. Find another way to get noticed." He lowered his voice. "My wife's been upstairs the last half hour. She was plastered when we got here; by now she's probably set in concrete. I bet she passed out on the bathroom floor. So how's about you and I go to

the poolroom; discuss your future with the company? I'll sneak us a bottle of—"

"Excuse me." She darted out of the corner and backed away. "I'd love to discuss my future with the company on Monday morning, Mr. Boyd, but I really have to leave. My sister has a cold, and I promised I'd stop by her place."

"Mary, Mary, Mary," Mr. Boyd said, and looked after her regretfully before transferring his attention to a receptionist.

She fled upstairs. Mark had carried coats off as guests arrived; probably they were piled on a bed. Still fuming about what Mr. Boyd had said, she peeked into an elegantly tiled bathroom, a den of some sort, and a dimly lit chamber with bordello-like mirrors and drapes. Yes, that was the bedroom, that was the bed, those were the coats, and that was Mrs. Boyd, open-eyed and open-mouthed but deeply unconscious, spread-eagled on top of her mink. Pathetic, Mary thought, tugging to dislodge the coat she'd bought five years ago at an off-season sale, and then her eyes strayed to Mark's bureau. Just look at that handcrafted, antique ivory jewelry case; just look at those silver-plated mugs; just look at that—good heavens. Was that actually a money clip? Was that actual money in it? What kind of idiot would leave money sitting out on his bureau when his house was full of guests?

A cocky idiot, she decided. An ostentatious idiot, eager to show everyone how well-off he was, how careless he could afford to be with sums his inferiors slaved weeks to earn.

An arrogant idiot; sure no one would dare to steal from him.

Another minute and the money clip was in her pocket. Oh no, she thought in horror. I've done it again. But she didn't undo it. Instead, she hurried downstairs, thanked Mark for the lovely party, and drove away.

"I don't believe it," Ginny said. "Mary, you *promised* you'd never steal again. And now, just four days later—"

"I know, and I'm sorry. But it's just two hundred and sixty-five dollars. That's thirty-five dollars less than the extra three hundred he'll earn in just one month, in the job he stole from me. And he can sure afford it. Ginny, you should have seen his house, his carpets, his furniture, his—"

"I don't care how rich he is. It's still wrong to steal from him. And what will you say when the police show up, asking how you all of a sudden managed to pay for your root canal?"

"They won't show up." Somehow Mary had known this even before she took the clip although she couldn't remember thinking it through. "Mark won't report the theft. How can he expect the police to trace cash stolen from his bedroom? Besides, if he goes to the police, they'll question every guest at the party. Does Mark want the police to embarrass Mr. Boyd by questioning him? Does he want the police to question *Mrs.* Boyd—who, by the way, is probably his top suspect? She was passed out on Mark's bed for who knows how long. If I were Mark, I'd figure she stumbled

around his room before collapsing, slipped his cash in her pocket without realizing it. Would a simpering sycophant like Mark Carlson report *that* crime to the police?"

Ginny considered this for a moment, then nodded. "You're right. He probably won't report it. You're probably safe. But that doesn't change the fact that you stole—again. You committed a crime. Don't let yourself become a criminal."

"Like Louie Vincenti?"

Mary glanced at the television screen. There was Vincenti being led away from the courthouse in handcuffs, and there was District Attorney Jim Newgate, speaking to the press, vowing this time Vincenti would pay for some of his crimes. Not very impressive for a district attorney, Mary thought idly—too soft-spoken, too ordinary, too thin, too short. But he kept his eyes hard on the reporter, speaking with quiet, unblinking authority. The camera stayed locked on him for a full minute. Mary looked up again. "Don't worry. I won't send a job application to the Mafia. But it is interesting to think about what Mr. Boyd said when he made his pitiful attempt at a pass. I fade into the background, he said. I never get noticed. That's a handy quality for a thief to have, isn't it?"

"But you're *not* a thief," Ginny insisted. "You're an honest person. And you won't ever steal again, will you? Promise?"

Mary stood up and shook her hand. "I promise," she said.

"I had every intention of keeping that promise," she said the next

week. "But that clerk, Ginny! That wretched little clerk! If you'd met her, you'd understand."

Ginny pressed the sofa pillows against her ears and moaned. "I don't want to understand. Don't tell me."

"You *have* to hear." Mary pulled the pillows away. "It was my special watch, the one Aunt Joan gave me for my college graduation. Of course I knew it wasn't expensive, but you know how much I love Aunt Joan, how much that watch means to me. So when it broke down, I wanted it repaired by an expert. I went to Rutherford's Jewelry. And that clerk—that wretched teenaged clerk—she glanced at my watch and flat-out sneered and said, 'We don't deal with this quality of watch. Perhaps a discount store can help you.' And she turned away like I was dirt, just because I wear a cheap watch. So of course I was mad."

"So why didn't you tell her off?" Ginny demanded. "Why didn't you say she has no right to treat customers that way?"

"I wanted to, but I couldn't. She was so well-dressed, so confident. I just didn't have the nerve to talk back to her."

"But you had the nerve to steal." Ginny touched the necklace tentatively, as if afraid to pick it up. "Oh, Mary. It's got to be worth ten times what the watch is worth."

Mary sighed. "It's not the money. It's the *principle*. And the—well, the opportunity." She paced about, trying to explain it to Ginny, trying to understand it herself.

"It's the strangest thing. I never used to notice opportunities to steal;

now I do, all the time. Even before that clerk spoke to me, I noticed her take the necklace out to show it to another customer. I noticed her leaving it on the counter instead of putting it away, I noticed where the security camera was pointed. I had no idea of stealing anything at that point, but I noticed. Isn't that interesting?"

"No, it's terrifying," Ginny said. "Your thoughts are turning in a dangerous direction, Mary. You're noticing things no honest person has any reason to notice."

"I know," Mary admitted. "And it is terrifying. But it's intriguing, too, in a way. I seem to have an instinct for this—a gift. All my life I've worked hard, I've done well, but I've never seemed to have a gift for anything, I've never gotten ahead. The prizes at school, the promotions at work—they've always gone to showier people, even when I've had higher grades or better ideas. Well, maybe I've finally found my gift. The people at the grocery store didn't pay attention to me, Mark doesn't pay attention to me, the clerk didn't pay attention to me, nobody pays attention to me. As Mr. Boyd says, I don't get noticed. Maybe I've finally found a field where that pays off."

Ginny looked at her uneasily. "But it's not *your* field. You're not a thief. You're an honest person."

"You're right." But Mary couldn't help thinking about how well she'd handled things. Moments after the clerk snubbed her, Mary was about to reach for the necklace when something told her to wait. Sure enough, the clerk turned around, checking Mary over, smirking contemptuous-

ly before turning away again. *Now*, Mary thought and covered the necklace with a casual hand, absorbing it with one deft movement. Resisting the temptation to run, she lingered to gaze at an earring stand, to squint at price tags, to sigh, to walk slowly away. She'd been perfect.

"Well, I hope this really was the last time," Ginny was saying. "And I hope you didn't get that clerk fired."

"I hope I did." Regrets evaporated as Mary's anger returned. "I didn't want to steal again—it was *her* fault for tempting me, leaving that necklace out on the counter. How irresponsible! And so snooty—she's probably alienated lots of customers, cost Rutherford's tons of business. I did that store a favor."

Ginny didn't want to hear it.

"Oh, rationalize it any way you like. Louie Vincenti probably has lots of rationalizations, too, for all the money he stole and all the people he killed. And the end result is, you both committed crimes."

"It's hardly the same thing," Mary said reasonably enough. "How's the trial going, anyhow?"

"Pretty well." Ginny glanced at the newspaper. "It looks like Jim Newgate will get a racketeering conviction—though of course that covers just a fraction of the crimes Vincenti's committed." She looked up. "I'm more concerned about the crimes you've committed. There *won't* be any more, will there? You think you're in control, but things like this can get out of control in a hurry. You could find yourself in over your head."

"I realize that," Mary said. "And

that's one reason I won't ever steal again." She almost believed it.

It was almost true. During the next few weeks there were only two more thefts. There was the woman at the restaurant—the loud, obnoxious woman, complaining about everything, abusing the waitress, scolding her meek little husband. When they went to the salad bar and she left her purse sitting open on the table, it seemed foolish not to take the wallet. Obviously a woman who'd be that careless with money could afford to lose it. Maybe this would teach her to take better care of her things; maybe it would give her husband a chance to scold *her* for a change. And Mary was proud of her even, confident steps as she walked past the table, of the subtle movement of her hand as she lifted the wallet from the purse, of the steadiness of her voice as she paused by the cash register to chat with the hostess. It was neatly done, and it earned her sixty-four dollars in cash.

And she couldn't feel guilty about taking the Music Mart bag a teen-aged boy carelessly left behind at a bus stop several days later. He and his friend had been whispering about drugs the whole time they waited for the bus, making plans to score some cocaine. Clearly they had more money than was good for them. Maybe now they'd use that money to replace the Walkman and the CD's in the bag instead of buying drugs; maybe she'd saved them from a fatal overdose. Mary smiled as she remembered how she'd let the boys push past her, shaking her head at the driver and stepping

back, pretending she was waiting for another bus. After the bus was out of sight, she'd yawned and stretched, letting her purse slip from her shoulder, scooping the Music Mart bag up effortlessly as she bent to retrieve the purse. A dozen people hurried by; no one noticed a thing. When she got home, opening the bag was a disappointment, for she didn't care for the CD's. But the custodian at work loved country music—she could give him an unusually generous Christmas present this year, without spending her own money. And she'd done those boys a favor.

"And I pulled it off," she said, half delighted, half ashamed, laughing to herself incredulously as she stuck a bow on the package of CD's. "I actually pulled it off *again!*"

Then Mr. Boyd, deciding Mary needed some professional development, said he was sending her to an Assertiveness Training workshop in Philadelphia. Maybe, he hinted, since he was showing such interest in her future, she'd find an appropriate way to thank him when she got back. Mary didn't want to go to the workshop, didn't want to think about what kind of thanks he had in mind, but didn't dare say no. Maybe I *do* need assertiveness training, she thought ruefully, and packed her suitcase.

The workshop was worthless, the flight home an hour of boredom followed by fifteen minutes of terror. They hit turbulent weather, the plane rocked and jolted and seemed ready to buckle, and Mary clenched her teeth and prayed, repenting desperately the five thefts she now

could scarcely believe she'd committed. In the first-class cabin a man screamed, and a brandy-bearing flight attendant risked injury as she lurched down the aisle to calm him. Then the plane steadied, landing with one last stomach-wrenching but harmless bump. I need to stop all this, Mary thought as she staggered away from the gate. This last month has been crazy, stupid, wrong. I need to clean up my act, straighten out my life. Most of all, I need a drink.

Apparently she wasn't the only passenger with that thought. The airport bar was crowded by the time she got there; she was lucky to find a place next to a moist-faced, middle-aged man.

"Dewar's, please," she told the waitress. She had narrowly escaped death and felt entitled to brand-name scotch. She'd put it on her expense account and see if Mr. Boyd fell for it.

The moist-faced man turned to her with a leer. "Dewarsh," he said. "I like that. Like a woman who likes real booze. Most women drink fruity little stuff. But not you, sweetheart, huh? You drink *real* drinks. You on the Philadelphia plane?"

"That's right," Mary said, betting this was the screaming man from first class, the man who'd had to be quieted with brandy and now was silencing himself with bourbon. He was tall and lean and had close-cropped, rust-colored hair, and he was evidently in the mood to make friends. Mary kept looking straight ahead.

He put a hand on her knee. "Me too," he said. "Hate flying. Only

thing that really scares me, y'know? But in my business gotta fly all the time. Just gotta or no business, y'know? I got some *real* special business here. Local talent can't handle it—all being watched. So they called me. I can handle it fine, boom boom boom and gone again. Y'know?"

"Oh yes," Mary said, appalled, looking at the pasty hand on her knee, wondering what to do. "I know."

"So that's why I fly," he said. "And I handle it fine with a little help from my friends—brandy, bourbon, all my friends. *You* wanna be friends—with brandy and bourbon and me? You know that song? Get by with a little help from my friends. Gonna fly with a little help from my friends. Ain't gonna die with a little help from my friends—yeah, yeah, yeah."

He was actually singing, right there in the bar, almost oblivious to her now. Mary swept his hand from her knee, swallowed her Dewar's efficiently, and got ready to leave. Then she noticed the carry-on bag her companion had stowed near his feet. Leather, for sure.

Swiftly, she thought it over. Rich enough to fly first class, obnoxious enough to put his hand on a stranger's knee and to desecrate not one but two Beatles' songs in public—yes. It would be a sin, but just barely. She'd sincerely repented on the plane, but if God kept throwing these opportunities at her, what really could He expect? She left five dollars for the waitress, took a last glance at the man, now urging other patrons to join him in "All You Need Is Love," slipped his carry-on

bag into her hand, and walked sedately away.

"I give up," Ginny said. "This is a disease—kleptomania, maybe. You need help. Let me find you a counselor."

"Like the counselor you found to help Grace with her eating disorder?" Mary unzipped the carry-on bag. "How much did Grace weigh the last time we saw her? Was it three hundred fifty pounds, or just three hundred? I don't have much faith in counselors, Ginny, and I can't feel much guilt about ripping off a drunken, lecherous—oh, what a nice Polaroid camera! And—oh, Ginny. Just look at this!"

She'd found a cheap-looking cigarette case, but there were no cigarettes inside. Instead there were tightly folded hundred dollar bills. Incredulously, she counted them. Twelve, thirteen, fourteen—fifteen hundred dollars! Who on earth would put so much cash in a carry-on bag? "Look," she said, holding the bills out to Ginny. "This guy must be incredibly rich."

"Maybe not now," Ginny said darkly. "Maybe not after you stole his bag. For all you know, that's every cent he has in the world. Mary, how *could* you? He said he's a businessman, right? Maybe he came here to make investments that would have ensured his future, and maybe you've robbed him of that chance and destroyed him. You *have* to find him and return his money. Look in that manila envelope. Maybe it'll tell us who he is."

"Oh, he's rich. He doesn't need it," Mary said. But she shook the en-

velope's contents out on the coffee table. Several newspaper articles about the Louie Vincenti trial. Several photographs of Jim Newgate, the district attorney who'd just won enough convictions to send Vincenti to prison for ten years. And a photocopy of a page from Newgate's week-at-a-glance calendar.

Ginny leafed through the stuff and frowned. "So your Mr. Obnoxious is interested in mobster Louie Vincenti and District Attorney Jim Newgate. Maybe he's a journalist."

"No," Mary said, suddenly cold, suddenly knowing. "He said he'd come here for a special job. Local talent couldn't handle it because they were being watched, but he could do it boom boom boom and gone again—Ginny! He's a hit man! He's been hired to kill Jim Newgate, and he'll do it some time next week!"

"You're jumping to conclusions, Mary. Who'd be reckless enough to kill a district attorney?"

"A specialist," Mary said promptly. "Someone hired to make a public statement, to show the world it's a mistake to prosecute anyone in the Vincenti family. He could do it, Ginny. He was drunk when I saw him—he's scared of flying, he was probably at least half drunk before he got on the plane—but when he's sober, I bet he could do it and get away with doing it." Mary herself had gotten away with half a dozen crimes she wouldn't have dreamed of a few weeks ago; it wasn't hard to believe a real professional could get away with much more.

"So what now?" Ginny demanded. "You put your stolen money in

the bank, and wait to read about Jim Newgate's murder?"

"No." Mary pressed her eyes shut. Prison. That was a definite possibility. Prison, disgrace, an end to all hopes of ever making anything of herself. But she couldn't be a party to murder. She'd been angry, she'd been infatuated with unsuspected skills, she'd yielded to temptation half a dozen times. But this was too much. She opened her eyes. "I'll go see Jim Newgate tomorrow," she said. "I'll warn him. I'll stop this."

Getting into Jim Newgate's office was easier than she'd expected. "I have to see Mr. Newgate right away," she told a secretary. "I have vital information about the Vincenti case."

The secretary looked dubious but picked up her receiver, murmured a few words, nodded. "Jim says it's okay," she said.

He looked more impressive in person than on television. His thinness now made him seem intense, not slight, and something compelling in his eyes made her forget how ordinary the rest of his face was. Obviously, Mary thought, *he's* the kind who gets noticed. That's why he's a district attorney.

Jim Newgate did a double-take when he saw her. "*You* have a connection to the Vincenti case?"

"Only an accidental one." She sat down, trying to look concerned but casual, wondering if she'd be able to get through the speech she'd rehearsed with Ginny, if she could turn over her information without confessing to a crime and getting

arrested. "I'm Mary Frith, an administrative assistant at Boyd Advertising. I flew home last night on the nine thirty plane from Philadelphia. It was a rough flight and I was shaky, so I stopped at the airport bar for a drink. I sat next to a man—middle-aged, tall, lean, rust-colored hair—who'd been on the same flight. When I left, I reached for my carry-on bag and mistakenly picked up his. At home, when I realized my mistake, I looked through the bag to try to identify its owner. I found some things you should see."

She opened the bag and spread the things out on his desk—the camera, the money-stuffed cigarette case, the manila envelope and its contents. He looked at each carefully, frowning when he got to the photocopy of the page from his calendar. He looked up. "So, Ms. Frith. How do you interpret all this?"

"At first I thought he might be a journalist, planning to do an article about the Vincenti case." Ginny's theory had an appropriately innocent sound, so she had adopted it. "Then I got worried. We talked for a few minutes in the bar, and he said he'd come to town for special business the local talent couldn't handle because they were all being watched—but he could handle it fine and be gone again, boom boom boom. And it occurred to me—well, it sounds melodramatic, but what if he's a hit man, and the Vincentis hired him to—you know. To kill you. And since he has a copy of a page from your desk calendar, that must mean someone on your staff—but this must sound silly to you."

"No." He stood up and paced. "I

wish it sounded silly, but it sounds all too plausible. After the judge passed sentence, Vincenti shouted some threats, and—damn.”

He stopped pacing and looked at her closely. “You picked his bag up by accident?”

“Yes.” She blushed. She couldn’t help it. “My carry-on bag is very similar—it’s navy, not black, but the bar wasn’t well-lit, I’d had a drink, and—well, I’d put it under the bar, probably right next to his. And he was drunk, and he’d put his hand on my knee, and he was singing Beatles songs. I was in a hurry to leave, so I didn’t look at the bag carefully, and—”

“Ms. Frith.”

Jim Newgate sat down again and looked straight at her, his voice gentle but unrelenting. “I want to trust you. I don’t want to suspect you’re working for the Vincenti family, tricking me into some embarrassing mistake. But if what you say is true, I obviously can’t trust even the people on my own staff. And you obviously didn’t take that bag by mistake. Did you?”

Oh God, she thought. I’m going to prison. Not able to look at him, she covered her face with her hands and took a deep, half-sobbing breath. “No,” she said. “I intentionally stole it. I knew it was his—I don’t even own a carry-on bag—but I saw he was drunk, and he made me angry when he put his hand on my knee. I’m not a professional thief—at least I wasn’t until a month ago. But I’ve started seeing these opportunities—just six, just small—and when I get angry, I can’t stop myself. It started with these three

bags of groceries—but you don’t care about that.”

“I do, but maybe you’d better not tell me any details.” He sat back, smiling.

“I knew right away that you were lying about something, and now that I know what it is, I can believe you about the rest. As for those six thefts—well, any crime is serious, of course, but if these were fairly petty—”

“They were,” she assured him, then hesitated. Somehow, she couldn’t lie to this man. “They were big enough to make a difference to me. Legally, they’d probably be considered petty.”

“Good. If I don’t find any evidence aside from your confession, and if you’ll swear you’ll never steal again—”

“I swear it,” she said, absolutely meaning it this time.

“—and if you’ll help me with this Vincenti thing,” he said, “then I suppose there’s no compelling reason to prosecute you for the thefts. Now. I take it you looked through that bag pretty carefully. Did you find any indication of the man’s name?”

“I didn’t find a name of a man,” she said, taking a copy of *Newsweek* from the bag, “but I found the name of a hotel. See? There, written on the back cover—Carrington Hotel, 51st Street. Do you think that’s where he’s staying? I could call the airport Lost and Found, ask if anyone’s reported the loss of a black leather carry-on bag, and see if he’s staying at the Carrington.”

“An excellent idea,” he said, and handed her the phone.

Yes, the Lost and Found clerk

said. A Mr. Frank King of Philadelphia had come by last night, upset about a black carry-on bag that had disappeared from the airport bar. Yes, he'd said he was staying at the Carrington.

The clerk urged her to return the bag to the Lost and Found, but Mary, at a signal from Jim Newgate, said no. She'd picked up Mr. King's bag by mistake; he probably had her bag. She'd handle the exchange herself.

"Good job, Mary," Jim Newgate said, hanging up the phone for her. "Now, before you call Frank King, I've got some calls to make. I obviously have a mole on my staff—I have a theory about who it might be, but I can't be sure so I can't trust anybody. Except my Uncle Paul. He runs a private detective agency. I want to get him over here to give you some protection. And I've got an idea about your Mr. King. I want to send for some pictures."

The pictures arrived before Uncle Paul did. Mary had no trouble picking out the rust-haired man she had seen at the airport last night.

His real name was Rick Banks. He'd long been suspected of being a freelance hit man, Jim Newgate told her, long been suspected of doing jobs for the Vincenti family. Jim would love to get him on an attempted murder charge. More than that, he'd love to use Banks to get to the Vincentis.

"So far, I've only been able to get Louie," he said, "and only on racketeering. But he's done much more than that, and old man Vincenti—God. He must have ordered this hit, and it's far from his first. If we could

prove that, we could send him away forever. But there's no point dreaming. Banks is a professional. He won't talk—he knows it'd be death to talk."

"So you'll just arrest this King?" Mary said. "This Banks?"

Jim Newgate shrugged. "Arrest him for carrying pictures of me? We don't have evidence of anything more. But if you return his bag and put on a convincingly innocent act, maybe he'll go ahead with his plan. Uncle Paul and I will be ready. If we catch him in the act, we can put him off the streets. That's not as good as getting old man Vincenti, but it's something."

The plan sounded risky but feasible to Mary until she met Uncle Paul. He was useless—flabby, balding, inappropriately jovial, dim, old. She could imagine the sort of detective agency he ran—a one-man, one-room deal where the windows were always grimy and the rent always past due, where losers who wanted their spouses followed wandered in because they couldn't afford anyone better. If this was Jim Newgate's only defense, he was dead.

"So you'll go to the Carrington and call King," Jim was saying. "Give him the story we worked out. Say you'll meet him in the hotel bar—Uncle Paul will be there. Whatever you do, don't go anywhere private with him. We can't protect you if you do."

You can't protect me no matter what, Mary thought, if you're relying on Uncle Paul. "So I meet this Frank King in the bar," she said. "I return his bag, I play dumb, I have maybe one drink with him, I'm on

my way. Then I've done my part, I'm clear?"

"With my thanks," Jim Newgate said, and shook her hand.

The call went smoothly. "Mr. King?" Mary said. "I don't know if you remember, but we met in the airport bar after the Philadelphia flight. I accidentally picked up something of yours, and you must've accidentally picked up something of mine, right? A blue vinyl bag with a copy of *Gaudy Night* and a half-finished needlepoint pillow with sunflowers and birds and—"

"Hold it," the man cut in. "You saying you got my bag? You saying you picked it up by accident?"

"That's right," Mary said apologetically. "I left before you did, so I'm afraid the mistake is all mine. I'm terribly sorry. I called the airport Lost and Found to get your name, and the lady said you were staying at the Carrington. So I asked my boss to let me take an early lunch, and I'm here in the lobby with your bag. If you'll bring down *my* bag, we can—"

"Hey," Frank King said. "Hey, hey, hey. I'm real sorry, lady, but I don't got your bag. I don't know nothing about no gaudy night or no sunflowers. But you got *my* bag?"

"Yes, I do." Mary made her voice sink in disappointment. "And you're *sure* you don't have mine? I picked up yours—you *must* have picked up mine. And I've worked *months* on that needlepoint pillow. It's my Aunt Joan's birthday present. It's very—"

"I'm sure it is, but I don't got it," he said. "I'm real grateful to you for

returning *my* bag, though. Look, I'll be right down and I'll buy you lunch, okay, as a thank-you? Maybe that'll make you feel better about the needlepoint thing."

She met the rust-haired man in the lobby, turned over his carry-on bag, and made only a token show of reluctance before agreeing to lunch. Uncle Paul was settled in a corner booth, halfway through his first beer and already calling for a second. So *that's* my protection, she thought. But she wasn't scared. Frank King might be a professional hit man, but he'd hardly dare to harm her in a hotel restaurant, and he'd have no reason to. Besides, all this felt strangely exciting. She felt charged, confident, bold. Maybe she *was* meant for a life of crime.

Frank King seemed charmed. He protested when she ordered tuna-fish and Diet Coke, talked her into having a steak sandwich and Dewar's instead. And he looked busily through his bag.

"There's my camera," he said happily, then held up the cigarette case. "You open this?"

"Why, no," Mary said, pretending to be flustered. "I'd have no reason to. I don't smoke. Besides, it's yours. Why would I—"

"Yeah, sure." He flipped open the case, smiling at the roll of bills. "You're an honest person—I see that. You open *this*?"

He held up the manila envelope, and she nodded. No point in playing this *too* dumb. "Yes, I did. I was hoping to find your name or your hotel—stupid me, it wasn't until hours later that I thought of calling the Lost and Found. So, you seem

very interested in the Vincenti case. Are you a journalist?"

He gaped blankly, then nodded. "Yeah, right. A journalist. That's me. Freelance, y'know? I'm doin' a big story on that brilliant district attorney of yours. Gonna sell it to *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Hustler*, some classy operation like that, y'know?"

"Oh yes." Mary fawned openly. But this wasn't like fawning to Mr. Boyd. This was fake. This was fun. "How impressive!"

He ate it up. "You bet it's impressive. You're impressive, too. Classy-looking, y'know? Not supermodel-classy, of course, but quiet-classy. Like a schoolteacher or a librarian."

She shook her head. "I'm an administrative assistant."

"Administrative assistant, sure," he said, delighted. "That woulda been my third guess. Look, you wanna have dinner tonight? Look, I like you—so honest and so classy-looking and all. Wanna have dinner at Brewster's? I hear it's a good place."

Brewster's. She recognized the name from the photocopied page from Jim Newgate's desk calendar. He was attending a Bar Association luncheon there next Tuesday. My God, she thought. Frank King must be casing all the places listed on the calendar page, picking the best spot for a hit. And Jim can't trust his staff and doesn't have anyone but Uncle Paul to protect him.

She smiled brightly. "Thank you, Frank," she said. "I get off work at five, and I'd be happy to have dinner with you."

Jim Newgate was adamant when she called him. "Mary—Ms. Frith,"

he said. "Thank you for your concern, but you've done your part. This man's dangerous. I don't want you to have any further contact with him. Call him right now—cancel the date."

"I'm sure I'll be safe," she said. "It's a public place, and I'm meeting him there—I'm taking my own car. I won't be alone with him at all. Besides, he has no reason to hurt me. He thinks that he's got me fooled, that I think he's a journalist."

"He thinks he's got you fooled now," Jim pointed out, "but he's got to be worried you'll figure things out afterwards. He knows you've looked in that envelope, and if you go to Brewster's with him and then he picks that as the spot for the hit—well. He won't risk leaving a witness behind. I don't want to scare you, but that could be why he wants to see you again—to learn more about you so he can get rid of you when the time comes."

"That may be part of his reason." Strangely, the thought hardly frightened her. She knew she could handle this. "But I'll bet he's also planning to use me as camouflage. A man sitting alone in a restaurant attracts more attention than a couple does; the people at Brewster's might be more likely to remember him if he goes by himself. And I have—well, this quality about me. People never notice me. I always fade into the background."

"You're being unfair to yourself," Jim cut in. "You look quiet and respectable, but that's not a bad thing. It's nice."

She was really starting to like this man. "It helped me as a thief," she

said. "I bet King thinks it'll help him, too, that we'll fade into the background together. He can scout around all he likes—and after the hit, no one will remember he was there. Really, this is a perfect opportunity. I may be able to sense whether he's chosen Brewster's as the place. And if he gets tipsy, he might say something you can use against the Vincentis."

Jim was silent for a moment, obviously tempted. But then he spoke firmly. "No. It's too dangerous. I can't let you go."

His assumption that he could order her around made her angry. "It's not your decision," she said. "I'm going. I'll call you tomorrow and tell you what happened."

She hung up. Not until ten minutes later did she realize what she'd done. She'd stood up to him. He'd given her an order, and she'd defied him. A few weeks ago, she'd been afraid to talk back to a rude teen-aged clerk, and she'd never had the courage to talk back to Mr. Boyd, though she knew a hint about sexual harassment would probably make him leave her alone. Now, she'd talked back to a district attorney. She'd been angry, but she hadn't swallowed her anger or let it tempt her into doing some stupid, self-destructive thing. She'd simply stood her ground.

I must be changing, she thought, amazed. Maybe I'm learning. Maybe I'm learning from Jim Newgate. He doesn't look impressive, any more than I do. He should be a fade-into-the-background type, too, but he hasn't let that happen. And he's not obnoxious, he's not showy, he's

not a bootlicker. He's just strong. He's just sure of what's right, and just insists on having his own way. And he gets it—unless he meets up with someone even more insistent than he is. Someone stronger.

Stronger than Jim Newgate. The thought of it made her smile, and kept her smiling through the long afternoon of doing mindless tasks, deferring to Mr. Boyd and covering up for Mark Carlson's blunders. She was waiting for five o'clock.

Brewster's was about ten miles outside of town, a yellow brick and dark wood structure that was probably supposed to look vaguely Tudor. Frank King was squatting in the parking lot when Mary arrived, snapping Polaroid shots of a side entrance.

Grinning, he walked over to her. "I'm an architecture buff," he said cheerfully. "Restaurants especially—I'm nuts about restaurant architecture. Wherever I go, I take pictures of restaurants, put 'em in a big scrapbook I got back home. Well! You hungry? I saved us a real nice table."

It was a very nice table, in a dim corner—and as Mary noticed, it gave them a very nice view both of the main dining room and of a side room probably used for banquets, and for Bar Association luncheons. Frank chatted steadily about his love of restaurants, his hatred of flying, his high opinion of the moderately low-cut dress she'd chosen. Casually, eyes constantly darting about the room, he picked up his paper cocktail napkin, took out a pen, and began sketching. He's

making a diagram of the room, Mary realized, probably noting exits and waiters' stations and anything else that might help him make a neat hit and a quick escape. Brewster's must be a serious contender.

Abruptly, he stood up. "I'm gonna check out the restrooms."

She blinked innocently. "Excuse me?"

"Oh yeah." He shook his head, amused at his mistake. "What I mean is, I gotta go to the men's room. Be right back."

He slid his cocktail napkin under his plate and left. That napkin is evidence of what he's up to, Mary thought. I want it. Quickly she slipped it into her purse, took out a pen, scrawled random marks on her own napkin, and knocked over her water glass. When Frank returned, she was dabbing ineffectually at the mess.

"Clumsy me," she said, smiling apologetically, holding up a sodden, inky wad of paper. "I spilled my water and had to use your napkin to clean it up. The waiter will bring you a new one."

He looked dismayed at first, then shrugged. "Yeah, sure. No big deal. So. You want steak or lobster or what?"

It wasn't until they'd ordered dessert that Mary spotted Uncle Paul at a small table on the other side of the room, absorbed in chasing down the last traces of his lasagna with a hunk of garlic bread.

So, she thought. Jim decided I need protection tonight, and he sent Uncle Paul. Good plan. If Frank King emptied a machine gun into me, it's just possible that Uncle

Paul would notice it by the time the paramedics arrived.

Frank walked her to the parking lot. "I had a great time, Mary," he said. "You sure you won't come back to the hotel?"

"I'd love to, but this has been such a long day." She blushed and looked down. The part of timid maiden came naturally to her. It wasn't really a part at all. "You understand."

"Yeah, sure." He patted her back. "You're a nice girl. I like that. I respect it. Some of my best friends are virgins. Look, tomorrow's Saturday. You don't work, right? Let's spend the day together. I hear this town's got a great art museum."

The art museum. Jim was scheduled to go there next Wednesday, for the dedication of the new wing. Evidently Frank hadn't settled on Brewster's as the spot for the hit—he was still casing other locations. "That sounds lovely," she said.

"Great." Frank took a notebook from his coat pocket. "I'll pick you up at ten, and we'll make a day of it. Maybe we'll stop by the courthouse, too, see if they got a tour or something; I hear the architecture's real interesting. What's your address?"

She felt a chill—but what, really, would she lose by telling him? He already knew her last name—he could find her address just by looking in the phone book. And she'd have to get in his car tomorrow, but they'd be on public roads—they wouldn't really be alone. She could handle it. She gave him the address.

He kissed her cheek before she got into her car, and she thought she saw genuine affection in his

eyes. But what sort of affection could a hit man feel? "You're a peach, Mary," he said. "You're helping me lots, making this trip a real pleasure."

It was almost midnight when she heard the pounding on her door. She looked through the peephole, and saw Jim Newgate.

She opened the door, and he walked in, shoulders rigid with indignation. "You promised me you wouldn't be alone with him at all," he said. "But you let him walk you to your car, even let him kiss you. And what's all this about the art museum?"

She got him to sit down and poured him a cup of tea. "How did you know about the kiss?" she asked.

"Uncle Paul told me. He was sitting in his car, parked right next to yours—didn't you notice him? The point is, Frank King could have strangled you in that parking lot. And you've agreed to spend the day with him tomorrow. You'll be alone in his car with him, completely at his mercy. Why?"

"Because we're going to the art museum and the courthouse. You'll be at the museum on Wednesday night, and you'll be at the courthouse constantly. Obviously he's scouting out more locations. I could pick up more information. I already picked up valuable information tonight. He took photographs of a side entrance at Brewster's, and just look at this napkin. I stole it from him. Isn't it evidence? Doesn't it prove something?"

She handed him the napkin, and

he looked at it and shrugged. "It *suggests* something. It's not proof. Anyway, I don't want you to be alone with him tomorrow. It's dangerous."

"I'll be fine." She stirred her tea. "But all things considered, I'd like to get my sister out of town. If you'll lend me two hundred and forty dollars, I'll get her on a plane tomorrow. We're giving our Aunt Joan a diamond necklace for her birthday; Ginny can deliver it in person. Now. Tell me more about the Vincenti case."

Frank King was in a fine mood when he picked her up the next morning. "Man, am I ever up for seeing some art," he said. "I may take some pictures. Got a brand-new roll of film."

Mary looked at the Polaroid camera sitting in the back seat. "I don't think you're allowed to take pictures at the museum, except in the sculpture garden."

"Then I'll leave the camera in the car," Frank said easily. "Speaking of the sculpture garden, I'm meetin' a fellow journalist there around ten thirty. Our talk's gonna be real boring, professional stuff. So you make yourself scarce for a while."

"Okay," Mary said. He's meeting his contact, she thought. Someone from the Vincenti family is paying him off, or providing him with a gun—he probably couldn't bring one on the plane. I need to get some evidence about this meeting.

So when Frank pulled into the museum lot and reminded her to lock the car door, she nodded obediently and clicked the lock—twice. Unlocked, and a convenient Pola-

roid in the back seat. Now, if she could just manage the timing.

As they wandered through the museum, Frank took out his notebook and made casual jottings. Exits, balconies, staircases. She'd love to steal that notebook but didn't dare. Well, photographs of his meeting with the contact would be even better.

At ten twenty-five he steered a path toward the sculpture garden. "There's my fellow journalist," he announced. "I don't wanna bore you, so how's about you go check out the snack bar?"

"Good idea," she said, and turned away promptly. She ran to the car, grabbed the camera, ran back past four security guards. Not one of them seemed bothered by the fact that she was running; not one took any notice of her. She ran to an alcove overlooking the sculpture garden—Frank had sketched it or she might not have noticed it—stationed herself in a corner, and took a rapid series of pictures: a nervous-looking, fair-haired young man handing Frank an eelskin briefcase; Frank smiling in satisfaction, weighing a heavy something in his hand; Frank and the young man shaking hands. And a flabby, balding man wandering aimlessly through the sculpture garden, gazing vacantly at a jagged granite hulk before shaking his head and wandering off again. Could it have been Uncle Paul? No, probably just some man who looked like him. In any city you could find thousands of men who looked more or less like Uncle Paul.

She snapped her last picture, ran

to the gift shop, bought more film, ran to the ladies' room. Quickly, she made the switch, slipping the pictures and the used film in her purse. Now, she thought. If I can just get to the car, leave the camera in the back seat, lock my door, and get back again.

But Frank was waiting when she came out of the ladies' room, the briefcase in his hand. "Hiya, sweetheart," he said. "My friend and me finished our business. Wanna check out more art?"

"Absolutely," she said, and shoved the camera in her purse.

Even if Frank had had a genuine interest in art, he could not have prowled those corridors more slowly. Mary was in agony for a full hour, constantly aware of the extra weight in her purse, sure she could never get the camera into the back seat unnoticed.

The gift shop, she thought. It's my only hope. She pretended to fall in love with some portraits of eighteenth-century ladies, declared she had to stop by the gift shop to buy prints, then begged for coffee. She left the bag containing her prints on the floor next to her chair. People sometimes left bags behind—hadn't she learned that from the boys who had left the Music Mart bag at the bus stop? As she and Frank walked into the parking lot, she stopped suddenly, slapping her hand against her forehead.

"My prints!" she cried. "I must've left them in the snack bar. Could you go get them, Frank? Please?"

He grumbled but turned back, as if used to performing chores for scatterbrained women. By the time

he returned to the lot, the camera was in the back seat, the car door was locked, and Mary was leaning against the hood, smiling. "Thanks for finding my prints," she said. "Where would you like to have lunch?"

"The Garden Spot."

He half-snarled it. It didn't sound like a place he'd usually favor, but Jim was scheduled to lunch there on Monday. Obviously Frank was still scouting for the perfect place for a hit. Obviously Mary still had to stick with him.

Jim Newgate showed up at her door less than ten minutes after Frank left. "You brought him up to your apartment," he said. "After all your promises, after all my warnings, you actually brought him up to your apartment. How the hell do you expect me to protect you if you do things like that?"

I *don't* expect it, Mary thought, not if the best you can offer is Uncle Paul. But she smiled pleasantly. "I was never in danger, Jim. I can handle Frank. And really, after I'd spent the whole day with him, after I'd let him buy me lunch and dinner, it would've been rude not to offer him a cup of coffee. And I think I got some valuable evidence today. I saw him sketching or taking pictures of four possible hit locations. And I took some pictures of my own. Do you recognize this man?"

Jim looked at the Polaroid shots and took a long, deep breath. "Yes, I do. He's a junior partner in the law firm that represented Louie Vincenti at the trial. So Alan Moore's running errands for the Vincentis

now. The whole firm may be in on this."

"Could you confront Alan Moore with these pictures?" Mary asked. "Could you do it now, tonight? You said Frank King wouldn't talk because he's a professional criminal. Moore's no professional—he looked very nervous at the museum. You could break him down, make him tell you about the whole scheme."

Jim shook his head. "I'm sure he doesn't know the whole scheme. The Vincentis put a dozen people between the top man and the hit man, and no one knows more than he or she has to. Moore probably knew he was doing something unkosher but probably didn't know just whom he was meeting or why. If I confront him, he'll just stonewall and call the next person in the chain. The plan will be called off, and we'll be back where we started. We don't have enough evidence to speak to Moore now. We'll have a better chance if he gets really scared later, after the attempted hit."

Mary sat forward on the couch. "You can't be sure it'll just be an *attempted* hit. You'll be on your guard, but that might not be enough. I can't believe that Monday you'll just start walking into these places Frank's cased, making yourself a target."

"I'll be all right. I'll have Uncle Paul watching out for me." He put the pictures in his jacket pocket. "Thank you, Mary. I'm glad to have these pictures, even though you probably took too many chances to get them. But that was the last chance you'll take. We're getting too close to the crucial time. I want you

to get on a plane tomorrow, join your sister in—”

“No.” She looked down at her hands. She’d have a harder time defying him if she looked into his eyes. “You could end this whole thing now by confronting Alan Moore or arresting Frank King on suspicion, but you won’t play it safe. Neither will I. If there’s any chance I can get enough evidence to make you take action before Frank takes a shot at you, I’m going to try. You need me. You don’t have anyone else you can trust.”

“I have Uncle Paul—”

“Uncle Paul!” She stood up and walked a few steps away from him. “Jim, I’m sure he’s a nice man, but he obviously isn’t up to this job. He’s old, he’s out of shape, he always seems so absent-minded and unfocused, he always—”

“—and you always fade into the background,” Jim said. “Uncle Paul is like you in some ways, Mary. Maybe that’s why you underestimate him. I don’t. If anyone can keep me safe through this thing, he can. As for you—I’m grateful for all you’ve contributed, but there’s nothing more you can do at this point.”

“I can go to Brewster’s again on Monday night,” she said quietly. “Frank has asked me to have dinner with him. I think that’s the place, Jim. He plans to shoot you at the Bar Association lunch on Tuesday—that’d be a dramatic public statement, wouldn’t it? And he wants to check the place out one more time. I want to go with him. I’ll watch him closely, and maybe I can figure out his plan—where he plans to stand, how he plans to get

away. Maybe he’ll plant the gun there in advance; maybe I’ll see him do it.”

She had stunned him. He sat silent and motionless for a moment, his hands resting on his knees, as if knowing the precise time and place for the hit had suddenly made it more real to him. “Monday night,” he said. “You’re not seeing him tomorrow?”

“No—he said he has other things to do. Maybe he’s seeing that lawyer again. Maybe you should have Uncle Paul follow Alan Moore.” Uncle Paul can’t do much harm that way, she thought.

Jim nodded. “Good idea. Moore might be meeting *his* contact tomorrow, to report on his conversation with King—maybe we can follow the chain up another link or two. And on Monday night Uncle Paul will be at Brewster’s. Take your own car—don’t spend even a minute alone with King. And I’m buying you an airplane ticket for Tuesday morning. Promise me you’ll use it.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said but knew she wouldn’t. How could she run away on the very day Jim might need her most?

At six fifteen on Monday night Frank surprised her by showing up at her apartment. “I got to thinking,” he said cheerfully. “Why take two cars when we can both go in mine? And I gotta make a stop on the way to Brewster’s, and I want you with me. Okay?”

“Okay.” Any change in plan was unnerving at this point, but maybe she’d see something when he made

his stop. Maybe he was meeting that lawyer again, or some other contact; maybe this would be the break that would convince Jim to arrest Frank King before the hit was attempted. She followed Frank to his car.

He turned north on Thirty-seventh Street. Brewster's was south of town. "I love this city," Frank was saying. "Great restaurants, great art museum—and, of course, great people." He patted her knee before turning his attention back to the road. "And great stores. I did some shopping yesterday, got some great stuff."

She noticed the Croft's shopping bag in the back seat. "You went to Croft's, I see," she said. "The one at the mall?"

"Yeah. I got a great shirt. I wanna stop back there tonight, see if I can find a great tie to go with it."

The mall, she thought, her body clenching. We can't be going to the mall. Jim will be there tonight. The page from his desk calendar came back to her—Monday night, 7:00, judge at safety poster contest, Center Court at mall. God, she thought. The hit's not tomorrow at Brewster's. It's tonight, at the mall. Frank must have cased it yesterday when I wasn't with him and Uncle Paul was following that lawyer. And now Uncle Paul is at Brewster's waiting for me to show up—Jim won't have even him for protection. All he'll have is me, and I can't do anything.

She smiled weakly. "You know, the Croft's downtown is even nicer than the one at the mall. Why don't we—"

"Nah," Frank said, not taking his eyes off the road. "I don't like down-

town stores—too stuffy. I like malls. And there's a nice jewelry store there, too—Rutherford's. I wanna get something for you." He smiled at her again. "You been so sweet, so friendly. I got something *real* nice in mind for you."

I'll bet you do, Mary thought, chilled. Jim had said Frank King wouldn't leave a witness behind. He must plan to kill us both tonight. Will he kill us both at the mall? Maybe he'll fire wild shots so he can escape in the confusion and—dear God. The poster contest. All those children in Center Court, and a ruthless professional killer firing who knows how many bullets.

He was already pulling into the parking lot. "Now, I want you to help me remember right where we're parked," he said cheerfully. "These mall lots get awful confusing, they're so big and all. See? I'm parking three rows to the left of the Croft's entrance, about five cars down. Can you help me remember that?"

"Yes," Mary said numbly. Why does he want me to remember where the car is parked? What is his plan, anyway?

He reached for the Croft's shopping bag as they got out. "I got the shirt I bought yesterday in here," he said. "In case I wanna check the color against a tie, y'know?" But the bottom of the bag sagged. He had something heavier than a shirt in there. The gun, Mary thought. He got the bag yesterday so he could get the gun into the mall unnoticed. He will look like an innocent shopper as he wanders through Croft's, walks into Center Court, positions himself to shoot Jim. And he'll have

me on his arm all the way. We will fade into the background. No one will notice us.

She had to do something, but she was too shocked to think, much too scared to act. She could only walk stiffly as he led her through Croft's. He stopped at a rack of ties, making a slight pretense of examining them. All the time he was gazing down the long aisle leading to the mall entrance, the shopping bag hanging loosely from his arm. He was looking toward Center Court. Already Mary sensed a new tension in him, a tightened focus. Do something, she told herself fiercely. Do *anything*.

Only one thought came to her, and she did what she could. She did it well, as she always did, without hesitation and without a single unnecessary movement. Frank took no notice of her. No one did. There, she thought. That's something but probably not enough. I'll have to think of something else.

She didn't have time. Frank turned away from her, his body stiffening, and she followed his gaze toward Center Court. The judges were walking onto a temporary stage, and people were clapping. Jim, smiling in his quiet way, chatted with a grey-haired woman, leaned over to shake hands with a little boy.

Frank turned to her abruptly. "Nah, I don't like these ties," he said. "And I'm getting hungry. I still wanna stop by Rutherford's, get you that little something. Tell you what. To save time, why don't you get my car? Remember where I parked?"

"Yes," she said, nodding mechan-

ically, trying to keep her voice steady. "Third row to the left, five cars down."

"Good girl." He couldn't give her more than a brief, rigid smile now—he was too intent on what came next. "So you take my keys and get my car and drive around to the entrance near Rutherford's. I'll meet you there in five minutes. Okay?"

"Okay," she said numbly.

So that was the plan. Not, thank goodness, a massacre in Center Court—probably just one quick shot for Jim, just enough noise and panic to let him slip away to the getaway car she'd have ready for him. Then he could kill her on the way to Brewster's and leave her body by the side of the road. It was a good plan, better than the one she'd imagined for him. But she had a plan of her own now. Her hand closed around his car keys. "See you soon," she said, and walked away.

He'd told her five minutes, but that was probably just to make her hurry—he wouldn't want to stand around waiting after the hit. He'd wait at least ten minutes before shooting to be sure she'd be ready. That was enough time to get to Jim and warn him, except that she couldn't get to Center Court from Croft's without walking right past Frank. She needed help. Quickly she scanned the shoppers as she hurried past them.

A petite young mother trailed by two toddlers, glancing anxiously at her watch; a distinguished white-haired man frowning at a display of men's colognes; a moderately burly, palely blond man in his early twen-

ties, hardly noticeable in the rush of more dynamic shoppers, lounging near a stack of pajamas—yes. A good bet. She walked over to the young man and smiled nervously.

"Excuse me," she said. "Are you a security guard?"

"Yes, I am," he said, seeming dismayed that she'd spotted him. "Is there a problem?"

"I think so. I saw a man—tall, lean, rust-colored hair, grey slacks, navy jacket—slip several ties into a Croft's shopping bag. He must be a shoplifter. Can you go stop him?"

Instantly the young man came alert. "There's no point stopping him until he leaves the store; he'll just say he was planning to pay for them. But those ties are tagged, so—look, come point him out, and if he tries to leave, I'll get him."

She didn't want to go with him. She wanted to leave Croft's and run to another entrance and reenter the mall in time to warn Jim. She definitely didn't want Frank King to spot her siccing a plainclothes security guard on him. But there didn't seem to be any way out of it. She sighed. "This way," she said.

She grabbed his arm, pulling him toward the racks of ties. Frank was walking deliberately toward the Center Court entrance, the shopping bag heavy on his arm. As parents clapped and beamed, Jim crossed the banner-strewn stage to pin a red ribbon on a Firearms Safety poster. She pointed; the security guard looked. Casually Frank stepped out of Croft's and into Center Court.

She'd been expecting it, but even

so the shrill, strident blare of the store alarm made her jump. Frank looked around him, startled by the sound, completely at a loss. In seconds the guard had a firm hand on his arm.

"Excuse me, sir," he said. "I need to look in that bag."

Frank looked at him and blinked, still not understanding what had happened. Then things began to dawn on him, and his eyes took on a desperate look. Wildly he swung at the guard with his free hand, hitting him squarely in the face, knocking him on his back.

Mary screamed. "Jim, get down!" she shouted. "It's him!"

Frank saw her, and understood—not everything, but enough. "Bitch!" he shouted, and then two shoppers were knocked aside, a display toppled over, and his arm was locked against her throat, his gun driven into her back. The security guard, dazed, shook his head and tried to stand; Jim ran toward the store; shoppers screamed and backed away. None of them could help her in time.

She still had his car keys in her hand. With her last burst of courage, she flung them far into Center Court.

"There," she gasped. "You scum. There!"

That startled him but only for a moment. He was dragging her backwards now, away from Jim and the security guard, past cowering shoppers and clerks, toward the parking lot entrance. "I'll get a car," he whispered, and she had never heard anything more evil than his voice. "If I have to kill ten people to do it, I'll get

a car, and I'll deal with you. Then you'll wish you'd let me shoot you clean. You'll be sorry you made me mad."

She clawed at his arm, but it was no good; he was too strong, moving too fast. It's over, she thought. I'm dead. And then suddenly she was facedown on the floor, an immense weight on top of her. There were grunts and shouts and a sharp blast of noise. She couldn't see anything. Then part of the weight was gone, then all of it. She was free. There were curses, more shouts, cheers. She sat up.

Jim was there, his arms firm around her, his breath soothing against her ear. And Frank King was facedown on the floor, his hands cuffed behind his back. Uncle Paul stood above him, sweating, wiping his red face with a handkerchief, panting.

"Sorry to give you that scare, Jim," he said. "You told me to wait for her at Brewster's, but I figured I'd better go to her apartment and follow her there in case our boy tried something funny. Sure enough, he did. I tailed them here and saw what he was up to, but she had things pretty well in hand. That was a neat trick, miss, slipping those ties into his shopping bag. So I figured I'd just stick around, tackle him if worse came to worst. When it did, I did. Hope I didn't hurt you, miss."

"Not at all," Mary said. Jim was still holding her; it felt very nice. She looked up and smiled. "Thank you, Uncle Paul."

"That creep Boyd fired you?" Ginny said incredulously. "You saved

the life of a district attorney, and he fired you?"

"Mr. Boyd hates bad publicity."

Mary finished writing the check for two hundred three dollars and eighty-six cents and slipped it into an envelope addressed to the Food Bank. "So when I said I'd be testifying at the trials of Rick Banks, alias Frank King, and old man Vincenti, Mr. Boyd realized I would have to admit I'd associated with what he calls 'an underworld type.' He thought that'd harm Boyd Advertising's reputation. I tried to reason with him. Alan Moore and three other lawyers at that firm have turned state's evidence; this time, Jim might bring the whole Vincenti family down. And a Boyd employee helped. I argued that the publicity might bring in new accounts. Mr. Boyd didn't buy it. I'd associated with 'an underworld type,' and that's all he cared about."

"But it's so *unfair*," Ginny protested. "You didn't do anything wrong. You were one of the good guys."

"I got to be a good guy only because I'd been a bad guy."

She wrote out a check for two hundred sixty-five dollars and addressed the envelope to the Girl Scouts of America. Mark Carlson would never donate a penny to any organization for girls.

"I *did* do something wrong. I stole a carry-on bag from a drunk, and I'll have to admit that on the witness stand. Jim won't tolerate perjury. Neither will I, now. He won't press charges, but I stole and everyone will know it. Mr. Boyd has a point. The publicity *might* hurt the firm."

Ginny sighed. "At least he gave you severance pay. You can use that to support yourself while you look for another job."

"No, I'm using it to make amends for the first two thefts. As soon as I can, I'll make amends for the others, with donations to whatever charities seem appropriate. I don't have to worry about supporting myself. I start my new job on Monday."

"Your new job?" Ginny said. "You found something already? Another advertising agency?"

"No, I'm bored with advertising. Uncle Paul's giving me a job. He says I'm a natural as a private detective—I fade into the background effectively, and that's a plus in a job where it doesn't pay to get noticed. And he says I'm resourceful and daring and—well, I won't tell you all the things he said. They embarrass me.

Anyway, he showed me my office—did I tell you he runs the biggest detective agency in the city, with fifteen operatives and a whole floor in the Bradford building? I'll have my own administrative assistant. I think I'll enjoy it."

Ginny sat down heavily. "Incredible. You steal, you repent, you do a few measly good deeds, and you end up with a dream job and a private office and an administrative assistant. What's next? Is Prince Charming sweeping you away to his castle?"

"Don't be silly." Mary walked to the mirror and surveyed herself contentedly. This was a new dress, a red dress, slightly more low-cut than the dress she'd worn on her first date with Frank King. "But Jim Newgate is taking me out to dinner tonight."

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Grow Your Own

Brenda W. Clough

The enormous papyrus in the big plastic tub sighed. "This isn't much like Egypt."

"That's right," said the pink-flowered African violet. "How about some cooler humidity? And some real food, maybe a pork chop?"

In the grip of a post-cocaine depression, the witch pretended not to hear. She continued to drip a very dilute solution of plant food onto the violet's roots from a long-spouted watering can.

The smaller African violet was, in every sense, more immature. It had, in fact, graduated only last week to the dignity of a three inch pot. From beneath its single stalk of baby-blue flowers it whined, "I want some Häagen-Dazs. I want some lox on a bagel. I want a standing rib roast, medium rare, with lots of pan gravy, and mashed potatoes and butter—"

"Will you shut up!" The witch slammed the watering can down onto the radiator, knocking the humidity tray over. Pebbles and scummy water sprayed over her faded jeans and shabby sandals. When she jumped back, she almost lost her footing. The ceiling-high fiddleleaf fig steadied her with a broad curvy leaf, but she shook it off. "Damn it, I'm as hungry as you!" She bared her teeth in a humorless smile. "I'm the only one who really is hungry, and not for food, either. All the rest of you are just reflecting me. Plants don't eat roast beef!"

"That pebble bruised my trunk," the dieffenbachia mourned.

It loved to wallow in self-pity, and now lowered a big spotted leaf to rub the hurt.

"We're slaves, that's all," it said.

"Chained by bonds of economic hardship," the big violet said. It was pink in more ways than one. "Exploited by bloodsucking capitalists. Like wetbacks in tomato fields."

"You've never even *seen* a wetback! You haven't even seen a tomato! You have no independent life! I'm the one who used to be a socialist!" The witch ran dirty fingers through her matted hair. "What have I done to deserve this? Other witches have cats for familiars. Or toads."

"I don't like tomatoes," the little blue violet announced.

"That's *me*. I don't like tomatoes." The witch took hold of herself with an effort. "Look, we're all in this together. The sooner you perfect the spell, the sooner I do some deals. Okay? And if you come through, I'll even buy some lox for you to taste."

The fiddleleaf fig twitched its stems doubtfully, and the bad-tempered grapefruit tree dared to scoff, "Huh!" But the enormous spider plant,

who due to her many dangling spiderlets had a very motherly nature, said, "Show us the archetype again, honey."

The witch dug down in her front jeans pocket and pulled out a crumpled Baggie. Very carefully she flattened it and shook down the contents until all the white powder was collected in one corner. Then she poured it out onto a chipped plate. Holding this carefully with both hands, she slowly circled the room, muttering the spell. After every plant got a good look at the heap of powder, she sprinkled a few grains onto the soil in each pot. She eyed the remaining powder wistfully for some time. Finally she took a five dollar bill from another pocket. Rolling it tightly, she snorted the rest of the drug.

"Okay!" she said, giggling a little. "Now you've got to do it. There's no more archetype! I'm going out—back soon." Out on First Avenue a police car wailed north towards Spanish Harlem. The witch grinned foolishly and made an avert sign. "When I come back, I want to see results!"

She left. The plants waited in silence for the big deadbolt to turn, and then the massive upper lock. Her footsteps receded down the stairs that the grapefruit tree, which had sprouted from a seed in this very apartment, had never seen. "No independent life, huh?" it said. "Hey, you're shading me."

"Sorry." The papyrus shook its sheaf of stems over some. "Is your bit almost done?"

For answer the grapefruit whipped a thin branch around hard. The eighteen inch thorn on the end struck deep into the window frame. "Ready when you are," it said with a nasty laugh. "Lucky one of us has thorns, huh? Since she doesn't keep cactuses."

"Cacti," the papyrus corrected. "Don't get swellheaded. We'd always have the dieffenbachia to fall back on."

"That's me, the second banana," the dieffenbachia said dolefully and, when the little violet snickered, corrected itself: "Always the bridesmaid, never the bride."

"Now wait a minute, Pappy," the spider plant said. "This talk of murder is curdling my sap. You promised we'd give her a chance. We don't know what will happen if we kill her. After all, she made us what we are. Suppose we regress? We can only think and talk because of her."

"You're greener than lettuce, toots," the grapefruit said. "What do you expect her to tell us? We're slaves, remember? Once we get good at growing vegetable alkaloids, dollars'll get you doughnuts she'll keep us at it forever." It began to snicker. "Greener than lettuce, get it?"

"I want it to be like that movie," the little violet piped up. "The one with the singing plant that eats people."

No one had ever seen a movie, but everyone understood. The papyrus ignored this artless suggestion. "Of course we'll give her a chance. And I'm sure she'll be fair. You all heard her just now—she said we're all in this together. But I just want to be prepared for every eventuality." It

turned to the sniveling dieffenbachia. "Come on, now—you're not called the dumb-cane for nothing, you know! Without your help, she might even get off a word or two!"

"Oh boy, what a disaster that would be," the pink violet agreed. "We're going to have to coordinate everything perfectly when the time comes—if it ever does."

"Vaster than vegetable empires, and more slow," the papyrus misquoted. As the leader of the houseplant cabal, the papyrus tried to sound smart. Unfortunately the witch herself was not very well read. Nor was she particularly stable, thanks to the drug habit. Sometimes the papyrus nearly despaired over the difficulties of running a revolution with the jagged fragments of her personality as embodied in her plants.

"Will it take years?" the little violet asked. "But I want to go home now! Tell me about Tanzania again, Pinky—where our ancestors came from."

Suddenly the fiddleleaf fig rattled every leaf. "Maybe it won't! Fellas, I think I got it! I'm growing the analogue!"

"You are?"

"Hurray!"

"No, wait!" The spider plant, suspended in a macramé holder at the single window, could see down into the street. "Here she comes, around the corner from 96th Street!"

"Oh, my aching stems," the dieffenbachia moaned. "Not when we're so close!"

"Quick, hide everything," the papyrus ordered. "And start growing coke—everybody!"

An intent green quiet reigned, disturbed only by the background roar of New York City traffic and the rustle of new leaves unfurling. The papyrus rocked its pot agonizingly forwards to partially hide the fiddleleaf. In the distance they could hear the witch's sandals slapping on the stair, nearer and nearer. Then the top lock and the bottom lock and she came in. She had shoplifted two apples and a rather green banana. "I wanted cauliflower, but the old bitch was watching me," she greeted them. Seething with undirected rage, she slammed the door. The brief effects of the coke had passed.

"Maybe you can buy some now," the pink violet said. "Look!"

Coyly it waved its leaves. From the center of the plant a new flower stalk had sprouted. The blooms were of course the rose-pink the violet's hybridizers had described. But the center of each flower held a fleck of powdery white pollen.

The witch plucked one with trembling fingers. She tipped the pollen out onto the old plate and stirred it with the rusty single-edged razor blade she kept for the purpose. "It looks perfect," she whispered. Then she positively attacked the poor violet, wrenching all the new blooms off.

"Ow!" the pink violet complained. "Take it easy!"

Almost sobbing with excitement, the witch collected all the pollen to-

gether. Then she sniffed it up through the rolled bill. For a few moments she sat quietly, stooped over the mash of tattered pink flowers. Then she began to laugh. She jumped up and prowled round the indoor jungle. Every plant had produced some coke, and she began to collect it and parcel it into cigarette papers. "I'm going to make a fortune! The first thing I'm going to do after I sell this is to hit a restaurant, a glitzy one. Maybe Tavern on the Green. Then Bloomingdale's—"

"Excuse me," the papyrus said. "Now that we've done what you want, we'd like something, too."

"And now I can really fix that fat slob of a landlord." The witch chuckled, folding cigarette paper packets. "Once I make some real money, I'll buy a condo." She examined the dieffenbachia's long drooping flower stalk. "What the hell? This isn't any good! Oh hey, wait a minute." She began to laugh. "You stupid twit!"

The dieffenbachia had not succeeded in duplicating cocaine. Instead, its green and white leaves had a very rectangular, papery look. On each corner a "5" was clearly visible. The witch plucked a leaf and then threw it down. "I won't be able to pass these! Look! All the serial numbers are the same!" Crushed, the dieffenbachia began to snivel.

"Excuse me," the papyrus persisted. "You know, of course, that we houseplants aren't native to this country? I personally am from Egypt."

"Yeah, yeah," the witch said, not really listening.

"Well, we six have a dream." Ersatz memories of Dr. Martin Luther King drifted through the papyrus's mind. "We look for a day when we can return to our native clime. To be free, natural, under the open sky. Watered only by the rain, shaded and fertilized only by our natural neighbors in the biosphere."

The pink violet began warbling, "I'm goin' where the sun keeps shining, through the pourin' rain . . ."

The witch halted in the act of stashing the paper packets in her bra. "Are you out of your *minds*? You're nothing but *plants*!"

"Most of us are from Africa," the papyrus said. "The dieffenbachia is from the Amazon jungle, though. You could send us through UPS."

"I certainly will not! You're going to stay right here and keep on growing coke!"

"Told ya," the grapefruit said.

"But, dear!" the spider plant said. "You have enough in your, er, underclothes there to last a long, long time!"

"You don't think I'm going to sniff all this! I'm going to deal it. With an endless guaranteed supply that I don't even have to smuggle in, I'll make a fortune!" The witch's eyes blazed with glee. "So forget it! You just caught the idea from me, okay? When I make a few million dollars, I want to go home, too, to Florida."

"Do you really mean that?" The papyrus paused for her answer, but the witch was buttoning her shirt. "Okay then. Fiddle!"

The fiddleleaf fig suddenly whipped all its branches aside. Revealed on a stalk in the center of the plant was a huge leaf, a folded and crinkled one that drooped nearly to the floor. The lower half was forked and already had a look of blue denim. Near the top was a smooth brownish place that was creasing into features.

"You see, we don't need you," the papyrus said. "Your analogue here can mail us home."

The witch shrieked. Before the plants could say anything more, she seized a pair of rusty scissors and lunged. The fiddleleaf writhed out of the way, but its pot hampered its retreat. The sharp scissor points stabbed randomly at the analogue and the plant. Then the witch shifted her grip.

"I'll fix you!" she yelled, and began to clip.

The severed analogue fell to the floor and slowly began to curl up. As the witch hacked at stem and leaf, the fiddleleaf howled, "Help me, guys! She's killing me!"

"We're your familiars," the papyrus pleaded, plucking in vain at her sleeve. "Aspects of you. You can't do this!" The witch screamed, a cry of pure rage that would surely modulate into words of power.

"Get a grip on yourself, honey!" The spider plant revolved slowly in its sling, trying to shield its spiderlets.

"Oh for Chrissake!" The grapefruit tree grunted as the witch kicked its pot over. "Bach, if you wimp out now—"

But the trembling dieffenbachia did not fail. With a flip of a leaf it shot a glob of numbing sap at the witch's mouth. At the same moment the grapefruit tree raised its dagger, stabbing down into her neck. The witch was so hopped up she hardly seemed to notice for a moment. As she fell, she trampled and tore at the valiant grapefruit tree, snapping its trunk off short.

For a long time nobody said anything. Then the little violet whimpered, "Is she dead?"

"I think so," the papyrus said. "All this red stuff is her sap, I think. And she's not breathing."

She was in fact drying up, curling up like a dead leaf. Familiars take after their witch, but the magician pays a price, too. "Like the Wicked Witch in the movie," the little violet said. "She's turning into humus!"

"I still feel okay," the fiddleleaf said, rubbing its scissor wounds with a stem tip. "We're going to survive her. We're her heirs."

"Flora of the world, unite!" the pink violet said.

"Oh, but the poor grapefruit," the dieffenbachia wept.

The papyrus surveyed the broken pot and scattered foliage. "Poor fellow. Like Moses, it will never enter the Promised Land."

"Just as well," the spider plant said briskly. "I do think the poor plant reflected all the *bad* qualities of our mistress."

"That's true," the papyrus said, much struck. "It had a very acid na-

ture.” Certainly the task of reaching Africa again would be easier without the grapefruit’s carping.

The little violet got the giggles again, but the pink violet spoke up over the noise. “We can do better than she did. The witch had to get on with all our qualities in her own head, and she was crazy all the time from coke. In fact, we can do a lot better than people in general once we get back to our proper environment. This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. Since we do have an independent life now, why shouldn’t we spread? Maybe even evolve? It’s time somebody developed a really just society on this planet. From each plant according to its ability, to each according to its need.”

The papyrus was startled. Such ideas had never occurred to it. So this was where the witch’s ambition had gone to! And those two African violets took on a sinister new significance. There were twice as many of them as any other plant here. Something would have to be done. But first the papyrus had to firmly reestablish its leadership. “Now she’s dead, we can simplify our plans some.” At full stretch the papyrus could just get a tuft of leaves into the witch’s pants pocket, where the garment had collapsed over her crumbling corpse. “Aha! Her MasterCard!”

“C’mon, her credit’s no good,” the fiddleleaf said.

“Well, my five dollar bills aren’t appreciated,” the dieffenbachia sniffed.

“Let’s try it anyway.” The papyrus tried to sound a calm rational note as it folded a stalk around the telephone. “Spider, can you open that book on the shelf and read me the number for United Parcel Service?”

All the plants kept quiet while the papyrus phoned. Only the little blue violet sang, “Ding-dong the witch is dead!” until the others hushed it.

When the papyrus hung up, its outer stalks drooped with discouragement. “Bad news. Potted plants aren’t accepted in the mail.”

“You incompetent capitalist tool!” the pink violet burst out. “Let me call FedEx! You can’t have got it right!”

“You just try it, with those wimpy little pieces of felt you call leaves!” the papyrus snapped. “Will you let me finish? There’s only one exception to the rule.”

The spider plant cried, “Yes? Yes?”

“You can ship leaf cuttings and dormant divisions.” The papyrus’s voice quivered and then grew strong. “I spoke of Moses just now, my friends. We too must perish in sight of the land of promise. The brave grapefruit will not be alone. We too are doomed, in this apartment with nobody to feed or water us. But we can UPS our children away—to liberty!”

The dieffenbachia spoiled the effect by wailing, “I don’t care about our children. Stem division hurts! I want to go *myself*!”

“Then don’t divide,” the pink violet said. “Only the strong survive. What are we going to need? Cardboard boxes—you could grow those, fiddleleaf. And spider could handle the packaging tape.”

The papyrus saw perfectly well how the pink violet seized control of the situation and thought regretfully of the grapefruit's deadly thorn. Even if papyruses could grow them, it would be foolish to waste the energy. Carefully it spoke in meek and agreeable tones. "Maybe I'd better practice printing, to write the addresses."

"Yo! Anybody home?" The door was on the latch, so the UPS man pushed on in. The packages were stacked on the table, with a MasterCard and a note: "Had to step out. Please take shipment and charge it."

He filled out the charge slip, shaking his head. Leaving the door unlocked, in New York yet! Lucky for the tenant that he was too honest to walk off with the credit card, or for that matter the TV. Not that there was a TV, or much of anything else worth stealing. He looked around at the tiny studio apartment. Dust furred every surface. Clothing and sandals were scattered on the dirt-strewn floor, and the sad brown leaves of dead houseplants lay sideways over the rims of the pots. The UPS man shrugged. He'd seen plenty of kooky hideouts in the city.

When he began to fill out the shipping forms, he paused in surprise. The return address on the first box was printed neatly enough, but the space marked "Send To:" was filled with gibberish, random letters and numbers. He held the box at arm's length, trying to decide if it was addressed in German or Russian or something, before he gave up and tried the next box. It was the same, and the next, and the next. Only the very last box was addressed clearly: "American Consulate, Cairo, Egypt."

"Well, okay," the UPS man said. He filled out his forms for the one box and put it on his handtruck. The other boxes he left on the table with the MasterCard. He added one of the standard UPS slips, checking off the box "Not Addressed/Packed Correctly." Then he went out whistling, pushing the handtruck, and considerably shut the door behind him on the silent room.

Pardon's Secret

Sherrard Gray

It was four A.M. and pitch-dark when Sergeant Dean March, with Chief Bunk Cummins beside him, knocked on the Mundays' front door. No one came, though lights were on in the living room. Finally, after a third knock, they heard the dull shuffle of feet in the hallway, and the door opened on a heavysset, gray face.

"Mrs. Munday?" said Bunk.

Without a word she led them into the living room and sank onto a beige sofa, nodding listlessly toward two chairs. The visitors sat down.

Half an hour ago Mrs. Munday had called 911 and said simply, "Something terrible has happened here. Send someone out, and hurry." Dispatch had called Dean, who was on night duty at the station, and Dean had called Bunk at home.

Mrs. Munday drew herself up a little. "I've always considered myself a strong woman, but after what I just saw . . ."

The two cops waited. Dean almost laughed, seeing Bunk struggling to stay awake. Bunk had insisted, though: "Anything big comes up, call me." Dean knew that Bunk was a little nervous about him after what had happened ten days ago. Well, the whole town was wondering about him.

Mrs. Munday was taking deep breaths to regain her composure.

Not a very attractive woman, with a snub nose, small eyes and sagging cheeks.

"Both my husband and I are light sleepers," she said. "I usually wake up several times during the night and can hear him tossing in his bed in the next room or fixing himself a snack in the kitchen. This morning I woke around two, and the house was absolutely silent. I looked in his room. He wasn't there, nor anywhere else in the house. I thought, oh no, he's started digging."

Mercedes Munday covered her face with her large hands, but when she finally took them away, Dean saw that her eyes were dry. She stared blankly at the fireplace.

"Digging?" prompted Bunk.

"What? Oh. Yes, for gold and silver coins. A few days ago Daryl Goff and his hired man—they live on Runaway Pond, hay our field, do odd jobs for us—found an old diary in a wall they were knocking out upstairs, and Hugo read something in it about coins buried in our hayfield. He planned to start digging today. When he wasn't in the house early this morning, I thought maybe he was so keyed up he couldn't wait for daylight, so I dressed and went outside. I called and called—no answer. Then with a flashlight—" Mrs. Munday shuddered and made a muffled, bleating sound as she approached the climax of her

story "—I found him in the corner of our hayfield by the stone wall, his head—" Another shudder, but no tears. She gave them directions to the site and sank back on the sofa. Before leaving Bunk persuaded her to call a neighbor.

As the two cops walked across the field in the dark, Dean felt dread at the prospect of what they were going to find, but also excitement. Was this the chance he'd been waiting for to redeem himself? His hearing before the selectmen was scheduled for next week. They had already persuaded Bunk to bust him down from lieutenant to sergeant, and he knew if a vote were held today he'd be looking for a new job.

Chief reached the site first: a dug trench with a dark form lying on the grass along its edge. A few feet away, a spruce and maple wood started, its tree trunks inky columns in the first streaks of dawn. "You might want to take your time looking at this," he said.

"I'm okay." Dean stopped and took deep breaths; then shone his light at the body, which lay on its back, one arm flung out over a mound of fresh dirt. Hugo Munday's red hair was matted with blood, and there were deep gashes in his right temple and throat.

"Grisly," said Bunk. "Looks like someone took a hatchet to him."

"Or a shovel," said Dean, his stomach churning, looking away to compose himself. "A sharp shovel could do that. A thrust to the throat, Munday goes down, the perp finishes him off with blows to the head."

After radioing for help, and as

more light spilled over Almanac Mountain to the east, the two looked around for the murder weapon. There were two roads in the woods, a wide gravel track that led from the field to a blue boathouse on the shore of Runaway Pond, and a logging road coming off Town Highway 8 and ending in a cutover three hundred yards from the body. No fresh tiretracks were visible on the road to the boathouse, but there were at least four different sets of tracks on the skid road. They found no trace of the murder weapon.

As the two walked back to the crime scene, a distant rooster crow pierced the quiet. They looked down the roadway to the blue boathouse. Beyond the boathouse, the pond's glassy surface reflected a pink flush. Above the far shore stood a set of farm buildings.

"The Goffs," said Bunk, staring across the water.

It was daylight when a gray van bumped across the field to where Dean, Bunk, and three other officers—one from the North Mills P.D., which had five full-time cops, and two staties—stood. A tall, gaunt-faced woman with a camera and a man with a bushy black beard climbed out, both in civvies.

"Sweet Mary," whispered Doris as she ducked under the yellow ribbon Dean had strung around the body. She snapped photographs while Charlie took a sample of dirt from Munday's throat and then looked around for footprints.

"What in the hell was going on here?" he said after a while. "Looks

like fifteen people were involved. Signs of tramping all over the place, broken twigs, peanut shells. And this." He held up a black plastic cap. "Found it by that little maple." He pointed to a young smooth-barked maple standing alone about ten feet from the trench.

Doris squinted at his find. "Looks like a lens cap for a camera or a pair of binoculars."

Charlie grunted. "I didn't find any usable footprints near the body except this partial in the dirt here. Shows a diamond pattern with a gap in one of the diamonds. I'll make a cast of it."

Half an hour later the M.E. arrived from Ravensburg in her four wheel drive Bronco and examined the body.

"Pretty, huh?" said Doris, putting away her camera.

Dean felt something heave up inside him again and turned away.

As Munday was being zipped up in a body bag, Dean and Bunk returned to the house, where they found the next-door neighbor, a dewy-eyed, talkative woman, staying with the widow. Mrs. Munday, sitting stonily in the kitchen with a mug of coffee, agreed to a brief interview. Most of her answers were given in a low monotone, but at one point, talking about the diary, she came to life.

"That damn mouse-gnawed book that Daryl Goff and his half-wit hired man found is the cause of all this," she said. "The diary was written by Pardon Moffat, who lived here over a hundred years ago. He tells how he sold fifty acres of land for two hundred dollars in gold and

silver coins. He must have been a terrible miser because he buried the money. But to get killed for two hundred dollars? Of course, Hugo claimed that those coins would be worth more today. Still . . ." For a long moment she was quiet, staring out the window at the sunlit hayfield behind the house. A pair of crows landed in the field, strutted around for a while as if marking out a house site, and flew off with ponderous beats of their black wings. "My husband's antiques business in town hadn't made the sort of money he'd hoped for, and then this diary came along. Hugo thought he'd dig up those coins, cash them in for a fortune, and retire early. He retired early all right." She peered into her coffee cup as if expecting to find the answer. "Personally, I don't think he was murdered for those coins—if they exist—but for an old grudge. He had a few enemies, including some of the people who worked for him."

"Do you have someone in mind?" asked Bunk, but all he got was a bitter half smile. Mrs. Munday waved a vague hand toward the upstairs.

"The diary is in his study, first door on the left. You can borrow it if you want."

"Watch your head," said Bunk as they stepped into a room on the second floor. "This house was built over a hundred and fifty years ago, and people were shorter then."

Dean bent his six foot frame and stepped through the doorway. The only furniture was a desk with a computer and an easy chair; two

walls were lined with books, and on the other walls hung paintings of lighthouses and schooners.

Bunk picked up a small tattered book from the desk, pieces of leather falling away from the cover. He opened it onto crackling yellowed pages. In places the ink had faded to obscurity, but for the most part the writer's neat, labored hand was legible. "Look at this penmanship," he said. "They used to teach it in school back then. I've got a couple of grandkids, smart as whips, but you need a pharmacist to decipher their writing."

As he cautiously turned the pages, the book showed a tendency to return to the same place as if it had been opened there and pressed flat. "June 1, 1872 . . ." he read from the top of the page. "Six piglets borned this morning. One died, the others healthy. Grass coming up in good fashion. Had to put salve on Strawberry's rear teats . . ."

"This guy Pardon Moffat recorded everything," said Dean.

"Aha, here we go. 'Sold the fifty acres on the other side of the brook for two hundred dollars to Andrew Sloane. He paid me in ten and twenty dollar gold pieces and silver dollars. Two of the silver dollars were as old as 1804.'"

"Those gold pieces ought to be worth something," said Dean.

Bunk was staring at the top of the next page. "Listen to this. 'I buried it by the northeast corner of the old stone wall.' And that's all. He goes on to talk about making a new handle for Thankful's butter churn."

"Thankful?"

"Must be his wife." Bunk gently

set the diary down. "I feel like a little kid again, reading about one-legged pirates and buried treasure."

Before leaving, they asked Mrs. Munday to take them to the toolshed, where she verified that her husband's favorite long-handled shovel was missing.

"So what have we got?" said Bunk as they walked to their cruisers. "A couple of days ago Daryl Goff finds a diary in Hugo's house that talks about buried coins. Hugo goes out sometime during the night and digs up the loot; the killer comes by, creases him with his own shovel, takes the money—and either takes the shovel or hides it in the woods—and splits. Far as we know, only three people knew about those coins: Hugo, his wife, and Daryl Goff."

"You forgot about the half-wit hired man."

Bunk nodded thoughtfully, his fingers drumming a tattoo on the hood of his cruiser. "I did, didn't I?"

The sun was well over Almanac Mountain as Dean pulled into the Goffs' barnyard. A white clapboard house stood to one side, with rubber tires on the roof to hold down sheets of tin. On the other side of the yard stood a weathered gray barn with half its windows broken or boarded up. Behind the barn, in a rocky pasture, grazed a herd of Jerseys. A well-built boy of about twelve was pounding a cedar fencepost into the ground along the near side of the pasture.

No one else seemed about, but then Dean saw a man jacking up the rear wheel of an ancient-looking International tractor.

"Morning," Dean said, walking over to him. He felt the boy with the post maul watching him.

The man was bare-chested in spite of the morning chill and wore a porkpie hat that might have been any color when new but was now greasy black. He swiveled his head, and Dean felt a sinking in his stomach: the washed-out eyes were blank, the mouth slack.

"I'm Lieuten—I mean Sergeant March of the North Mills police department."

A three-legged German shepherd, barking, yellow teeth bared, came hobbling across the barnyard. Dean waited for the dog to stop, but it kept coming, spittle flying from its jaws. He unhooked his billy club and as the dog lunged, swung. There was a rip of pants leg and a yelp, and the shepherd backed away, snarling.

The man with the jack handle grinned, showing a set of teeth that would make a dentist want to shoot himself.

"Rattler likes your pants, don't he?"

"You better call that dog off."

"Good doggy," said the man, patting the shepherd, who had stopped growling and was sitting on its haunches. "Won't do no good to call him off. Rattler's deafer than a hammer."

"You're not Daryl Goff, are you?"

The man stared at Dean.

"What's your name?"

"Don't got one."

Dean tried another tack. "Did you hear about your neighbor, Mr. Munday?"

"Got what he 'served," said the man.

From the front porch of the house a voice shouted, "Beat it, damn you!"

Dean spun around while Slack Jaw giggled.

A blond-headed man in a T-shirt was walking across the porch. A woman stared over his shoulder at Dean and then went back inside. The man was chewing something—the remnants of breakfast?—and wiping his mouth with the back of a hand. He kicked at a chicken on the porch steps, and with a mild squawk as if this happened all the time the hen flapped off the steps into the dirt.

Still chewing, the man walked up to the tractor. He looked in his mid-thirties with a clean-shaven, watchful face. Dean thought he'd seen him around town, at a Little League game maybe? The dog edged a step closer to Dean.

"Something, ain't it?" said the blond-haired man. "Heard about Hugo on the radio."

"You're Daryl Goff? His wife said you were doing a job for him."

"Yeah, me and Sippy here. We finished spreading manure and putting up fence, figured we'd make a little extra on the side. Got to, we're barely getting twelve dollars a hundredweight now. Dairy farming's going down the tubes. You probably heard about that farmer in East Montpelier they arrested for child abuse?"

Dean shook his head.

"He had left his farm to his kids."

Dean laughed; then remembered why he was there. He slid a glance at the ground, looking for a diamond tread similar to the one Charlie had found near Munday's body, but saw

only scuffed dirt and tufts of trampled grass.

"Something wrong with my shoes?"

"You mind if I look at the soles?"

"You're goddamn right I mind. You wanna look at my underwear, too?" The young farmer glared at him. "Prune Face telling you I killed her husband?"

"Prune Face?"

"You seen her, haven't you?" Daryl, his back against the tractor hood, looked tired. Behind the tractor Dean noticed a stoneboat with a long-handled shovel propped against it. "Where did it happen?"

"By the stone wall corner in that field you hay," said Dean. "Near a freshly dug hole. Do you know what that was about?"

"No clue."

"His wife thinks it had something to do with that diary you found in his house."

Daryl straightened up from the tractor.

"Did you read the diary?"

For the slightest moment, Dean thought, the dairy farmer hesitated. "Hell, no. None of my business."

The hired man, Sippy, grinned, a trickle of drool threading down his stubbled chin. "Don't look at me, Fuzzman, 'cause I can't even read a stop sign."

As Sippy spoke, Dean found himself staring at the shovel leaning against the stoneboat. Was he hallucinating? Sunlight glinted off the blade, and he swore he could make out a clump of reddish hair and stains of something dark. Blood? My God, they couldn't be that careless. Kill a man with a shovel and

then leave it lying around without even wiping off the blood?

Sippy didn't look overly bright, but was he that dumb? At times there was a quick intelligence in those pale blue eyes, and that crack about stop signs was hardly the remark of a moron.

Dean was tempted to ask if he could look around but knew without a warrant that was improper. He didn't want to rock the boat, since he was already in enough trouble with the selectmen. Damn it, though, wouldn't that be sweet if he could crack this case the first day?

From beyond the barn came the *pok pok* of the boy's maul, driving another fencepost into the ground. With a sigh, Dean thanked the two men for their time and moved toward the squad car, feeling the shepherd's hot breath on the back of his thighs.

"Two hundred dollars in gold and silver coins," said Bunk, taking a first baseman's mitt from a canvas carryall and pounding his fist into it. The regular coach for the North Mills Lancers, a Little League team, had been out for two weeks with a hernia operation, and Bunk, who often worked as a Little League umpire, had volunteered to fill in. The kids understood that even when off duty he might have to leave suddenly in case of an emergency. "I wonder what that's worth today? Wait a minute, I just thought of something."

A slow grin broke across his face. "Remember that newspaper article on the front page of the *Courier* a couple of weeks ago about that pro-

fessor from Lincoln College? A book she'd written about Vermont in the eighteen hundreds called *Something Yankees* had just come out. The article said she was an expert on the post-Civil War era."

"Post means afterwards, right?"

Dean was in his scarred wooden chair by his desk, one leg over the armrest.

"Yeah."

"I don't remember much about the article," said Dean, "because I only glanced through it, but I remember her picture."

Bunk laughed. "You would. She wasn't exactly ugly, was she?"

"There's another reason I remember that story," said Dean. "Back in December or January I stopped her husband for DWI, and she was with him. Fowler Dugan. The guy's a complete lush. Rude, too. Kept saying he should have stayed in New York City instead of moving to this hick cowtown."

Bunk sat on the edge of his desk. "This'll be my last day coaching. Ronnie should be able to take the team over again tomorrow."

Along silence, during which Dean struggled with whether to tell Bunk about the shovel he'd seen at the Goffis' yesterday morning. He could hear Bunk saying, you saw red hairs and blood on a shovel twenty feet away? Give me a break. He sensed that Bunk had something on his mind, too, the way he kept looking at him and then at the glove.

"I just don't know," Bunk said, pounding his glove. "Am I getting too old for this job? A good friend of mine from Brattleboro quit police

work four years ago and is raising daylilies. He loves it. It's seasonal, pays well, and you definitely meet a higher class of people than a cop generally runs into. He keeps telling me that's what I ought to do."

Dean felt a twinge of panic. "You can't quit on me, chief. You haven't shown me all the ropes yet."

"Listen, Dean, we've got to talk about something. That punch you threw in the Peekaboo Lounge? You've told me the guy was a creep, but what did he do exactly?"

"He called the woman he was with a slut and slapped her. Slapped her hard, too; one of her earrings went flying."

More glove pounding. Finally Bunk said, "Don't get sore, but I gotta ask this question: Did you have anything going with the lady he slapped?"

"Come on!" Dean was on his feet, hands spread wide. "I'd never even seen her before that night."

"Good. Because..." Chief's voice trailed off.

"I have an eye for the ladies?"

Bunk slid off his desk and lugged his bag to the door of the squad room.

"You want to interview this Professor Dugan? Show her the diary, find out what those coins might be worth? Maybe they don't even exist. Maybe that diary is a hoax. But if it is, why would someone plant it in the wall? Why go to the trouble?"

"I'll check it out."

Bunk, his eye on Dean's pants leg where Rattler had sunk a fang, was biting back a smile.

"You might want to change your pants before you interview her." He

opened the door, and turned back. "Be businesslike, all right? Don't forget, you're on probation. So no flirting. I don't care if she looks like Marilyn Monroe."

Dean raised two fingers in a V. "Scout's honor."

John Niederer, a dean at Lincoln College, looked up as Sergeant March, carrying a manila envelope, stepped into his office. "Oh-oh, I knew I should have fastened my seatbelt this morning."

"Thanks for telling me," said Dean. "That should be good for a month in jail."

"Which is probably what I need." Niederer glanced at his cluttered desk, a stack of papers perched precariously on the edge, and shook his head wearily.

"You'd think during the summer session my load would be lighter, but it doesn't seem to be. What can I do for you, sir?"

"I'm looking for Professor Dugan."

The academic's jaw dropped, and Dean quickly added, "I'd like to consult her about a hundred-year-old diary. Find out if it's authentic or not."

"Aha." The dean tapped a pencil against his chin. "Yes, she'd be good at that. Do you mind if I ask what this is all about?"

Dean hesitated, then decided he could trust Niederer not to run his mouth. "The Hugo Munday case."

"Well now." Niederer laid his pencil down. "I don't mean to speak ill of the deceased, but Munday was a sharp trader. Once at his shop in town I bought a loveseat from him

that he claimed was three hundred years old. I had it appraised. Turns out it was more like one hundred years old. You want to see Penny?"

"Is there some out-of-the-way place I can meet with her?"

"Let's see . . ." The dean's craggy face took on a mischievous twinkle. "This is rich. Listen, she's teaching a course right this minute on the Reconstruction. Go into her classroom."

"But . . ." Dean touched his holster. "This might cause a stir in front of all those students."

"You've never met Penny, have you?" said Niederer. "She's played a few practical jokes on me; this'll be my chance to get back at her." He rose from his chair, the stack of papers cascading onto the floor. "Fundraising pleas," he said. "Basically, that's all I am, a glorified panhandler." He shook Dean's hand. "How I would love to be a little mouse in Penny's classroom and watch."

Dean found Penelope Dugan in Room 326 on the third floor of a redbrick building next to Administration. Heads turned as he walked down the corridor, the hardware on his belt clicking and clacking. The door was open, and he slipped in and went to the back of the room. Several students gaped; Professor Dugan frowned but kept talking. Something about carpetbaggers and scalawags. She was a tall woman, a couple of years older than his twenty-eight, he guessed. Her dark chestnut hair was swept back in a French twist; a pair of horn-rimmed glasses hung on a chain around her neck. Though she looked tired and

a little anxious—twice he caught her glancing at the clock—he marveled at the graceful way she moved between her desk and the blackboard.

Five minutes later, as the class ended and students filed out of the room, he approached her desk. She smiled tightly and waited.

"Sergeant March from the North Mills police department, ma'am. I have a favor to ask. Do you have a class now?"

"No." Her expression showed a mixture of annoyance and curiosity.

"You must have heard about Hugo Munday?"

"Hugo Munday?"

"He owned that antiques shop, Junk & Disorderly. He was found murdered yesterday morning."

"Oh, that man. Yes, of course, it's been on the news."

Gingerly Dean took Pardon Mofat's diary from its manila envelope. "We found this in his study. It goes back to the Civil War, and we think it might have a bearing on the case."

Professor Dugan's eyes widened a little, and Dean hurried on.

"Seeing as how you're an expert on American history, we wondered if maybe you could look at it?"

Donning her glasses, Professor Dugan took the diary and opened it, and as she read a yellowed page, a small smile touched her lips. "This might be quite a find. He talks here about making a new axe handle out of leverwood."

"Leverwood?"

"Another name for hop hornbeam. Can I take this home with me?" Dean nodded, and she slipped the

diary into her briefcase. "Who told you about me?"

"I read that newspaper article about your book *Fetching Yankees*."

The young woman laughed, brushing back her hair. "*Fetches Up Yankees*. Who told you where to find me now?"

"Dean Niederer."

"That rascal. The students probably think I'm being arrested for something. DWI maybe?"

"You don't look the DWI type."

"Thank you." Her eyes held his for a moment, sending a pleasant shiver up Dean's spine. He remembered Bunk's warning: "Be businesslike."

A dawning light had come on in her face. "We've met before, haven't we?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Another laugh from the professor. "You're a polite one, aren't you? We met last January on a cold snowy night on the Coatsville Road. You pulled my husband over for driving erratically."

"I'm sorry." Dean didn't know what else to say.

"Don't be. He's a drunk, among other things." She snapped shut her briefcase. "I'll let you know, sergeant."

Dressed in black jeans and a black sweater, Dean was driving his aging Nova, lights off, down the gravel roadway that descended through the woods to the blue boathouse on Runaway Pond when he decided to take another look at the crime scene. He might find something they had missed before. He stopped and with a flashlight hoofed it back up the

road to the spot where Munday had been digging. But his beam picked up nothing new. As he was leaving, something about the young maple that stood alone near the trench caught his eye. About four feet up the trunk was a wide gash. A single bead of sap glistened in his light. He had not noticed the gash before and wondered if it could be the work of a woodpecker. But this was a mere sapling, and woodpeckers only went for older trees with dead branches and juicy beetles.

Shrugging, he went back to his car and continued down to the boathouse.

It was after midnight, and in the dim light of a waning moon he could see above the far shore the bulky silhouettes of Daryl Goff's barn and outbuildings. Inside the boathouse he found a battered aluminum canoe and an outboard with a small Evinrude. Taking the outboard and a set of oars, he rowed quietly out onto the pond. He knew one thing: he didn't want to rouse that three-legged dog again. A fox barked from the wooded ridge to the north. Moments later a bullfrog let out a low sound that was more sigh than croak, and then it was quiet.

This is crazy, thought Dean. I'm trying too hard to be a hero. Furthermore, it doesn't matter what I do because the selectmen are going to can me anyway.

Pickerelweed rustled against the boat's bottom as he drifted closer to shore. The hull grated on sand, and he jumped out and pulled the boat ashore. Rattler might be deaf, but Sippy and Daryl weren't, nor, he assumed, were Daryl's wife and kid,

so he had to be quiet as a ghost. He walked up a meadow path to the barnyard and crept across to the tractor and stoneboat.

The shovel was gone.

Dean crouched and listened. His eyes, well accustomed to the dark by now, picked out an open two-bay garage attached to the house. With a whispered, "Here goes nothing," he walked over. In the left bay was a pickup truck, in the right bay an engine on blocks, a loose valve cover, and wrenches piled on top. Beyond the engine a row of tools leaned against a wall. Heart thumping so hard it hurt his chest, he crouched by a posthole digger and two long-handled shovels, flicked on his flashlight. The first shovel looked rusted and unused, but the second one brought a grunt of triumph.

Strands of reddish hair and what looked like dried blood clung to the pointed blade. He scraped a sample into an evidence bag, flicked off his light, and started to depart.

He felt a stinging blow against his knee; a split-second later there was a deafening clatter of metal on cement. Staggering sideways and cursing under his breath, Dean remembered too late the engine; saw the loose valve cover and wrenches that had toppled onto the floor.

Loud barks erupted inside the house. Someone shouted from the second floor, "What's going on?"

Plunging back down the slope, Dean heard barking behind him and knew that someone had let Rattler out. A bullet whined overhead. He tripped over a root and sprawled facedown, scrambled to his feet oblivious to the pain in his knee, and

kept running. It occurred to him—very briefly—that there was something comical about a three-legged dog chasing a cop down a meadow path, but he didn't laugh. A bare stride ahead of Rattler, he jumped into the boat and pushed off with an oar. Another bullet whistled over his head as he started rowing.

Thump. The boat came to a sudden stop, and Dean tumbled backward, banging his head against the stern seat. Getting groggily to his knees, he shone his light into the water beside the boat and blinked in disbelief.

A car. He'd run into a submerged car. He flicked off his light and managed to push free with an oar and resume rowing. The shouts and barks grew more distant, and there were no more shots. His head throbbed, and he felt a trickle of blood down the back of his neck, but he had what he'd come for: some hard evidence.

Driving into North Mills, his head feeling like a punching bag, Dean called Bunk at home on his cell phone, waking him up. "Can you come down to the station? I think I've broken the case. You may want to fire me, too."

Corporal Rob Bannister, bleary-eyed from three cups of bad coffee, was holding down the station when Dean pulled in. "What the hell," said Bannister, almost dropping his fourth cup. While Bannister cleaned and bandaged the back of his head, Dean told his tale, finishing just as Bunk stepped into the squad room.

"Sweet Mary," said Bunk. "What happened?"

"Traffic accident."

"Oh great. The other driver's fault, I hope."

"There wasn't another driver. I was boating on Runaway Pond and ran into a parked car."

Bannister chuckled and went to the coffee urn for a refill.

"Dammit, fellows," said Bunk, "this is hardly the time for jokes."

By the time Dean had got to the end of his account, Bunk had sunk into a chair and was shaking his head. A muted clacking sounded from a far corner of the room where Bannister had gone back to his computer.

"No point in having that hearing, is there?" said Dean. "I'm fired."

"You should be. Using improper means to get evidence. You'll probably end up getting me fired, too. Don't you understand? We can't use this evidence. Any self-respecting judge would toss the case out of court faster than Roger Clemens can throw a strike."

Dean winced from his throbbing head. "I wanted to break this case so bad."

Chief drew a half cup from the coffee urn and went to a window overlooking Depot Street, stared for a long time at the town library looming in the dark across the street. He turned away and sat on a corner of his desk. "I've been a cop for thirty years. Three years ago I was getting tired of this job, real tired: the irregular hours, the politics, busting your hump to catch a guy and then watching him get a suspended sentence. I was thinking of quitting, maybe trying daylilies like my friend in Brattleboro, and

then you came on-board and your enthusiasm, your . . . I don't know, faith, I guess, gave me a new lease on things." A boyish grin spread across the lined face. "So, hell no, I'm not going to fire you. The selectmen had better not try either."

Dean swallowed hard and looked down at his shoes. A predawn milk truck rumbled by outside, downshifting for Slapp Hill.

"Okay, you can give those evidence bags to Charlie, but tell him to keep it quiet. Tell him there may be a problem with the way that stuff was acquired." Bunk tapped his empty cup on the desktop. "So who do we have for suspects? Daryl Goff, Sippy, and the widow. I know Daryl's an outlaw; he's probably got a pot patch hidden in the woods somewhere and that car you ran into at the bottom of Runaway was probably one of his, but I don't see him bludgeoning someone. Still—"

"What?"

"About ten years ago, long before you moved to North Mills, there was bad blood between Daryl's dad and the Mundays, something to do with Munday diverting water from the inlet to Runaway. But old man Goff is dead now and I haven't heard of Daryl carrying on the war."

"Sippy?"

"From what you say, he's definitely one brick shy of a load. I guess he's our number one suspect because I just don't see Mercedes doing it. I've heard rumors Hugo was running around on her, but I still can't believe she'd go that far."

"She wasn't shedding any tears."

Bunk shrugged.

"Tears don't always mean a lot."

Standing, he dumped the last swallow of coffee into a sink by the urn. "What about Daryl's kid? He was a Little Leaguer not long ago—until he found more interesting pursuits. A rugged farm boy if I ever saw one."

"That's grasping for straws, don't you think? He must be all of twelve years old."

Another shrug from Bunk. "Okay, buddy, go home and catch some shut-eye. I'll wait here till Rachel comes on."

"Thanks. By the way, on the way to Runaway Pond I stopped by the crime scene again."

"And?"

"Nothing. Well, there was something I hadn't noticed before. A gouge in that maple beside the hole, and it looked fresh, too, like maybe someone had whacked it with an axe—only it was four feet off the ground."

"Hm," said Bunk. "That reminds me, I was planning to take another look out there myself. I know half the town's been sniffing around, but I still have the feeling we might find something. We might get lucky. Because I'm not ready for daylilies quite yet." Chief sighed and looked sleepily at the clock on the wall. "Can you meet me here this afternoon around two and we'll drive out together?"

"How about three? I'm meeting Professor Dugan at the Chicken-bone Cafe at two." Bunk's eyes widened. "Strictly business, chief. She's going to tell me all about the diary. We still don't know for sure that it's genuine."

At two o'clock, Dean found him-

self with Professor Dugan in a corner booth in the Chickenbone Cafe. His head still ached dully, but the soreness in his knee had subsided. The only other customer, a member of the town road crew, sat at the counter bent over a cup of coffee and the Burlington *Free Press*.

Dean was wondering if Dugan had stayed up late working on another book. She looked a little frazzled, her wide forehead furrowed, circles around her eyes—but she still looked good. He had arrived at the Chickenbone first, seated himself, and minutes later watched her get out of her car in black slacks and a rose-colored turtleneck and walk across the parking lot. Yes indeed, he had thought, and then reminded himself: business, Dean. Strictly business.

Professor Dugan held a fork poised over a wedge of banana cream pie. "I shouldn't," she said. "But then, I've done a lot of things I shouldn't have."

He watched her dig into the pie—she took a large bite and frowned as if it weren't up to par—and wondered why she didn't get fat. Maybe teaching took more out of a person than he'd thought.

"Someday," he said, "I'd like to take one of your classes in American history."

She reached into her purse on the seat beside her and took out the diary in a plastic Baggie. "That can probably be arranged," she said, loading up her fork again. "Sorry to be such a pig, but I missed lunch at school. They put enough sugar in this thing." She raised the fork to her mouth, then put it down un-

touched, her eyes searching his face. "Not to be nosy, but wasn't there a squib on you recently in the *Courier*?"

"I was busted for hitting some guy in a lounge."

Dugan leaned back in her bench and laughed, the tiredness seeming to evaporate. "I'm sorry," she said. "Is that what that bandage on your head is all about?"

"No, that's something else."

"Well. Police work has its share of excitement, doesn't it?" As she shifted in the booth, her knee brushed his, and he felt the voltage go through his body.

"So what did you think of the diary?" he said quickly. "Is it authentic?"

"Absolutely. It's fascinating from the perspective of social history, describing how Vermonters lived one hundred and twenty years ago. A lot about raising pigs, using a saw pit to make boards, how to make your own bag balm."

"What about those coins?"

"Someone made a haul. I suggest you contact rare coin dealers, see if anything has turned up."

"Like those twenty dollar gold pieces?"

"The double eagles? That's what they're called. They're worth something, of course, but the real prize may be those two 1804 silver dollars."

"Why?"

"The price of silver went way up in 1804, which meant that the silver in a coin was worth more than its face value, so the government stopped minting them."

"Sort of like baseball cards, right?"

The fewer in circulation, the more they're worth?"

Professor Dugan tapped the diary with a slender finger. "Before someone dug up Pardon Moffat's hoard, there were only about ten known 1804 silver dollars, probably worth, depending on their condition, up to one and three-quarters million apiece."

"Jeezum Crow!"

Bits of banana and cream filling showed on Professor Dugan's fine teeth as she laughed and said, "Do you know what you are, Dean? You're a fetched up Yankee."

"I meant to ask you: what is a fetched up Yankee?"

She raised a forkful of pie to her lips. Suddenly she pushed the plate away so hard it slid across the tabletop into the wall, hitting it with a whack that sent the rest of the pie flopping onto the Formica. "Enough sugar in there to kill an elephant. When would you like to start?"

"Huh?"

"I said when would you like to start auditing my class?"

Dean snapped back to the present, took a sip of coffee. "Soon as I find out who killed Hugo Munday."

Professor Dugan nodded, then reached for her purse.

"No no, Penny, my treat."

The brown eyes twinkled. "I didn't think you were ever going to call me Penny."

Dean had barely started back to the station, when he got a call from Bunk telling him to swing by the crime lab in Ravensburg and leave the diary with Charlie.

"He's not happy we gave it to Dugan," he told Dean. "You gave that diary to a college professor?" he says. 'She'll keep the damn thing for a month and then probably write a book about it.'"

"Good ole Charlie," said Dean. "Okay, I'll drop it off."

"Meet you at the widow's half an hour later than planned then," said Bunk. "Make it three thirty."

The crabapple trees in Mrs. Munday's lawn had started to blossom, and a pair of phoebes were raising a brood under the eaves. As the two officers walked up, wearing short-sleeved shirts in the warm sun, she stood on the doorstep. A car with New York plates—probably a relative, thought Dean, come to help put her life back together—was in the drive.

"Have you arrested anyone yet?"

"Afraid not," said Bunk as he and Dean fumbled off their caps.

"You probably never will either. 'Unsolved.' Is that what you'll stamp on my husband's file?"

"We'd like to look around the crime scene again if that's all right with you?"

"What do you expect to find?"

"We might see where your husband's killer walked through the woods. A footprint, a thread caught on a branch . . ."

"Birders were in those woods the day before my husband was killed. A whole flock of them with their binoculars and Roger Tory Petersons. And all sorts of busybodies have been sneaking around there since." Mrs. Munday lifted her jowly face and sighed, and Dean had the im-

pression she enjoyed making them wait. "All right," she murmured finally, and went back into the house.

They walked across the hayfield to the woods between the stone wall and Runaway Pond. The police ribbon was still up, but in the field and woods were signs of many trampling feet, more of the peanut shells that Charlie had found, and a mélange of tiretracks on the logging road that entered the woods from Town Highway 8.

"I don't know about Sippy," said Chief as they walked back to the stone wall, "but Daryl moves like a deer. I used to hunt with his dad. A Goff doesn't tramp through the woods like other hunters—he glides. Maybe we should hire a professional tracker."

Dean was only half listening. He stopped a few feet from the trench, staring at it.

"What's wrong?"

"It's bigger. Someone's been digging since the murder."

The two went up to the rim, and Bunk cuffed his own head. "How stupid can we get? We figured all along that Hugo had dug something up, the killer came by, bopped him, and took the treasure. Now it looks like it happened the other way around. The killer was digging when Hugo walked up on *him*."

Dean nudged at a loose stone, sent it rolling into the ditch. "He must not have found what he was looking for because he came back last night." They looked around some more but didn't find any clear footprints. Then, near a pile of fresh dirt, Dean found a partial with the diamond pattern.

"Whoever it is hasn't changed his shoes," he said. "Let's get a warrant and search the Goffs' place."

"Good luck," said Bunk. "Easier to get blood from a stone than a search warrant from Judge Wilcox. Dammit anyway. If we don't solve this case, the selectmen will probably fire us both. I think I'll start reading that book on daylilies I took out of the library the other day."

Dean only grunted. He had another wild idea. Why not? he thought. He had nothing to lose.

"Got some big news." Bunk laid *The Joy of Raising Daylilies* down on his desk. It was eight P.M. the same day. Dean had told him about his latest plan to catch the killer, and Bunk had said to meet him at the station. "Just got a call from Charlie at the lab. He's been working straight out on that diary since you got it to him this afternoon. He also has the results on the red hairs and blood you got from Daryl's shovel. They're from a fox. Daryl probably thought it was rabid and shot it and buried it."

Dean shook his head. "So sneaking to the farm last night and getting my head busted has amounted to zero."

"That's nothing," said Bunk. "Wait till you hear what Charlie found in the diary. You'd better sit down."

"That's okay, I can take it standing."

A chuckle from Bunk. "Okay. You know what that buried loot probably is? A dead dog. Charlie discovered that a page had been very neatly removed, probably by Par-

don himself, just before the sentence, 'I buried it by the northeast corner of the old stone wall.' Actually, two pages of writing, since Pardon wrote on both sides of each sheet. Charlie noticed on the two facing pages faint indentations from what had been written on the missing sheet. He took the diary to the state archivist in Montpelier, and with the help of special lighting and dusting they were able to pick up some of the missing text. They found the words 'dead puppy' near the bottom of the second page. The next line is 'I buried it.' Nowhere did they find any mention of two hundred dollars in gold and silver coins."

"Maybe I'd better sit," said Dean, taking the edge of Bunk's desk. "So someone killed Hugo Munday over a bunch of old dog bones?"

"Bones that are probably not even there any more. Charlie says they would have dissolved by now unless buried in an airtight, rustproof container. But the killer doesn't know that. We can assume he still thinks there's a cache of valuable coins."

"So if Pardon just buried a dead dog, why did he tear that page out?"

"Aha. Seems our friend Pardon wasn't as straight an arrow as we thought. Charlie and the archivist found a reference to another woman from the missing sheet. Charlie figures just before Pardon died he removed that page and hid his diary in the wall to make doubly sure his wife never found out. Interesting, huh? Why didn't he just burn the diary? Maybe he hoped someday it would be discovered and his record of life back then saved."

"I'll be a monkey's uncle," said Dean. "By the way, remember that gouge on the tree near the hole? I may have figured out what that's about." He told of his interview with Professor Dugan and how, when she suddenly shoved her pie away, a lightbulb went on in his head. "It's called frustration. When the perp didn't find what he was looking for, he wound up and threw his shovel."

The bushy eyebrows went up a little. "Not bad. We'll make a cop out of you yet." Bunk's thick fingers ran an arpeggio over *The Joy of Raising Daylilies*. "You think the perp will come back for another dig?"

"If he does, I'll be there to welcome him."

Dean blew on his cold hands and wondered why the perp couldn't have murdered Munday in July or August instead of May. Stretching out a cramped leg from his folding chair set up inside a clump of cedars along the wood's edge, he squinted in the dark at his watch. Ten P.M. A sound brought his head up. A faint splash from the pond. He strained an ear, but the splash wasn't repeated; probably just a fish jumping. A puff of wind rustled the new leaves on the little maple between him and the trench; then quiet again, and cold.

An hour later, thinking he'd heard something from the direction of the widow's house, he stood and listened. Maybe he was just hearing things. He walked to a knoll on the far side of the stone wall, saw his Nova sitting by the woods. With no

lights he'd driven across the neighbor's land, figuring the digger wouldn't come from that direction. If it were the widow, she'd come across the hayfield; Daryl or Sippy would probably come by the pond; someone else through the woods.

Dean went back to his cedar lair and sat. And waited. And fell asleep. Waking with a start, he saw the first streak of dawn over the Goffs' farm and heard the vacuum pump come on in the barn. He stood, stretched, and walked back over the knoll to his car.

The next two nights produced the same disappointing result. Except that he was getting progressively tired. Twice during the day, parked by Vilette's sawmill with his radar gun to catch speeders, he had fallen asleep. One of those times he had woken to see driving slowly by and self-righteously scowling, in her sky-blue Lumina, Mildred Sweeney, wife of the head selectman.

Now, in the police station, he jerked awake to hear the chief laughing.

"You need some rest, Dean. Keep this up and next time Mildred will find you asleep in a ditch."

"If no one shows up tonight, we'll try something else." There was a pause and Dean added, "What does a dog lily look like, anyway?"

"Daylily, Dean. Daylily."

Goosebumps skittered up and down his arms like frightened mice as, dressed in black, face smudged with charcoal, he sat on his chair in the cedars and peered out toward the trench in the earth twenty feet away. Starlight and a sliver of moon

cast a faint sheen over the mound of dirt.

The thought of how he would appear to the killer as he stepped from his hideaway made him chuckle. There wouldn't be any need to draw his gun because the guy would probably keel over from sheer fright.

His chuckle died in the night. Something rustled on the ground in the woods behind him. A skunk looking for a nighttime snack? A raccoon? Silence.

Then he heard it: a hollow thump from the pond, the unmistakable sound of an oar against a gunnel, followed by the low splash of an oar blade.

Standing, he looked down the boathouse road to the pond, a dark sheet of rippled water with silver highlights, and saw in the middle the outline of a boat. A light went on in the boat, and its beam quartered the water.

For maybe ten seconds Dean was puzzled. Then he understood, and disappointment swept over him like a wino's breath: someone was fishing with a jacklight. Illegal, but hardly the crime he was after. The outline of a porkpie hat told him it was probably Sippy.

He sank back into his chair. He was taking deep breaths of the sharp-smelling air to stay awake when a different noise caught his attention. The low purr of a car or truck coming through the woods behind him on the old logging road.

The vehicle, its lights killed, stopped about forty feet away in the woods; a door creaked open; footfalls rustled on dead leaves. A

figure clothed in black paused at the wood's edge holding something that glinted. The figure moved toward the ditch, and there was something about its graceful movement that made Dean gasp.

The figure glanced around, looking directly at his clump of cedars. In the thin moonlight he saw a long-handled shovel; he also made out the French twist and wide forehead. Penny Dugan lowered the shovel and began digging.

There must be a mistake, thought Dean, but he knew there wasn't. For a stunned minute he remained seated in his hideaway. Finally he stood and walked over. Engrossed in her digging, Professor Dugan did not look up. The shovel rose with a load of dirt, which was tossed onto the growing pile.

"Looking for something?"

The shovel clattered to the ground and quick as a cat she scooped it up. "Good grief." Professor Dugan patted her chest, squinted at him in the darkness. "Is that you, Dean? You just took ten years off my life. Listen, you can give me a hand."

He didn't move.

"There's some loot buried here. Bigtime. Those 1804 silver dollars I was telling you about."

"Dr. Dugan, you're under arrest for the murder of Hugo Munday."

She straightened, the shovel's handle sliding through her fingers, the blade resting on the ground. "If this is a joke, I'm not amused."

"We'll get a warrant to search your house, probably find dirt from this very hole. Those shoes you're wearing—"

Shovel raised, her face twisted

with desperation, Penny Dugan sprang toward him out of the ditch, moving like a leopard. Dean, stumbling backward, reached for his gun. As he pulled free his .357 Magnum, he felt himself going down, saw the shovel's curved steel blade glinting in the darkness an arm's length from his face.

With a loud groan, Professor Dugan threw away her tool, which landed with a clatter on the mound of dirt and stones beside the trench. Dean, flashlight in one hand, revolver in the other, scrambled to his feet.

"I can't hit you," she cried. "I don't know why, but I can't." Her face was stark in the light from the edge of his beam. "There's a fortune buried here. Help me dig it up and we'll go halves. We could even spend it together—once I got to know you better, of course." She took a step closer, dark eyes glowing. "I don't know what you make as a cop, but it can't be much. And what a job: hauling drunks to the lockup, looking for petty thieves, shooting rabid animals. Just think, we could..." Her voice trailed off. "I'd be better off talking to that stone wall, wouldn't I? You damn incorruptible cop." Tears rolled down her cheeks, winking like sequins.

Dean unsnapped the handcuffs from his belt.

"You don't have to do that."

"I think I'd better. You seem to be full of surprises, professor."

"Now it's 'professor' again?"

He led her over the knoll to where his car was parked. They stopped outside the Nova's rear door.

"This rust bucket isn't yours, is it?"

"Yeah."

"My God!"

She turned, facing him, then looked down at her cuffed wrists and murmured, "Save your breath, Penny." He opened the back door, and her head came up. "Can I at least ride up front with you?"

He nodded, and closed the door.

Sitting next to Chief at the long table in the Town Hall, Dean, although dog-tired, had no trouble staying awake. It was the selectmen's special meeting to decide his fate. All four selectmen and one selectwoman were present: Hollis Sweeney, who was also the chair; a Latin teacher; two dairy farmers; and a stonecutter. At seven o'clock sharp, Sweeney, flaunting a new set of false teeth and wearing a little plastic shield bristling with pens and pencils in his front pocket, cleared his throat.

"Let me first congratulate both Sergeant March and you, Bunk, and the rest of the department on solving Munday's murder. You have rooted out a cancer in the heart of our community. However . . ." More throat clearing, coughs. "Unfortunately, Sergeant March has had some difficulties conductwise. It has come to my attention that he was seen recently sleeping on the job. There have been other instances of unprofessionalism. Last week he was even seen walking around in torn trousers. But by far the most serious incident involves his hitting a man in the Hog's Breath Inn in Coatsville."

"It wasn't the Hog's Breath Inn," growled Chief. "It was the Peekaboo

Lounge, and the guy he hit had it coming."

Sweeney's new chompers barely showed in a strained smile. "Whether he had it coming or not, it hardly sets a good example for our youth. You must feel that way, too, Bunk, since you've worked so many years with the Little League."

One of the farmers, George Underhill, noted that it "warn't dignified," and the stonecutter, Felix Tunucci, nodded grimly. The two other selectmen shifted in their chairs and studied their fingernails.

"Any more discussion before we go into executive session to decide this matter?" asked Sweeney.

"Yes." Bunk leaned forward in his chair. "I've been on the force for almost thirty years, and in all that time I have never met a more dedicated officer than Sergeant March. That was proved by his work, including many unpaid hours, in the Munday case. Sure, he has his lapses, like all of us, and we're working on that." He looked around the table and spoke so quietly that the others strained to hear. "Dean has made me proud to be a cop. If he goes, I go."

There was a protracted silence. Thumps from a basketball game in the gym upstairs. Finally Sweeney cleared his throat and placed his meaty hands on the conference table. "I say to hell with going into executive session. We'll vote on it now. All those in favor of not only retaining Dean but promoting him back to lieutenant, raise their hands."

Five hands went up.

"That's that." Hollis Sweeney's

new teeth blazed forth as he stood and walked over to Dean, hand extended.

Penny Dugan was being held in the correctional center in Ravensburg for lack of fifty thousand dollars' bail, which her husband refused to pay. Dean, in court for a case of school vandalism, afterwards drove over to the center.

She was housed on the second floor of the granite and marble building, which dated back to the 1850's. His footsteps echoed down the long corridor as he approached cell 27, inside of which were two women in orange jumpsuits. One of the women, middle-aged with reddish-blond hair and a double chin, wore a pair of headphones and lay on a lower bunk watching a small TV. In the far corner the second prisoner was bent over a table, writing.

For half a minute neither woman noticed the visitor, and then the TV-watcher swiveled her head and yanked off her headset. "Jumping Christmas! You scared the hell out of me." Her cellmate went on writing.

"Sorry about that," said Dean. He nodded toward Penny.

"Hon," called the redhead, "come up for air. You got a visitor." Penny kept writing, and the woman inserted her pinkies in her mouth and let out a piercing whistle.

Penny's pencil went flying; her notebook flopped on the table like a shot bird. Turning, she saw Dean, stared openmouthed for a moment, and then smiled. "It's Sergeant March." She stood and walked over to the bars.

"Lieutenant March."

Penny raised an eyebrow. "All right. For putting yours truly behind bars, no doubt."

Dean glanced down at the floor.

Professor Dugan turned to her cellmate. "Maureen, you have to meet this guy because he's unreal."

Maureen raised a plump forefinger in hello and said, "Ain't bad looking, either."

"A cop with a heart," said Penny without a trace of sarcasm.

"Why?" whispered Dean.

Tears sprang to her eyelids, and she blinked them away. "I don't know," she whispered back. "Some people are just greedy. Hugo read about me in the papers, brought the diary to my house. I don't think he'd told his wife he was showing it to me. At first glance, I told him, it looked genuine. He left the diary with me, and later that night I read that bit about buried treasure. He picked up the diary the next day, and I lied to him. I wanted time to dig up the money myself so I told him the diary looked fake, but I don't think he believed me. He must have seen that greedy gleam in my eye. That night I sneaked out and started digging. He showed up with the same thing in mind, and I offered to go halves. The idea didn't appeal to him."

One of the bars slanted a shadow across her face, obscuring her left eye. The right one, dark and wet, bore into him. "Why did I kill him?" A deep sadness etched her face. "The American Dream, right? Pie in the sky, only this was silver in the ground. I was going to get rich and leave Fowler and his freaking

trust fund, quit teaching, travel, and write my books. Become famous." She drew an orange sleeve across her eyes. "I can't believe how foolish I was. In the first place, those silver dollars are probably worn so badly they aren't worth much. Or if they're in good condition, getting rid of them would be like trying to fence the *Mona Lisa*."

"Do you know what's really buried there?" Dean told her about the missing page, the dead dog.

For half a minute she just stared at him and then said quietly, "I love it. Talk about poetic justice." She was actually grinning. The grin faded, and she ran a hand up and down one of the bars. "You've asked me a lot of questions, now it's my turn. Were you really going to audit my course in American history?"

"Yes."

"That's nice." She looked sad

again, maybe even sadder than before.

"What are you writing?"

Professor Dugan brightened. "Notes for my next book: life inside a women's prison. Maybe I'll call it *Fall from Grace*. Or *Ain't No Pie in That Beautiful Sky*. Say, that's a poem."

"What is a fetched up Yankee?"

"You, Dean. You're a fetched up Yankee. Someone who was brought up right."

He stood there for a moment longer; the slanting shadow had moved away from her eye. "Well," he said finally, "I'd better be going."

Her hands gripped the bars, her eyes watched him. He thought he heard the faint chirp of a bird from outside—or was that the creak of Maureen's bedsprings? He lifted a forefinger, touched one of her knuckles, and turned away. His footsteps echoed down the marble hallway.

Parrot Soup

J. Randal

First it was a pet parrot, a hyacinth macaw, with a terrible temper and a mean streak as wide as its whole self. Then it became a murder weapon, but it was still a parrot, and still vicious; had it been a prizefighter, it would surely have been named Kid Foul. It was so beautiful and majestic that first-time visitors were drawn to it for a closer inspection. It was at this point that those who observed the bird up close acquired its mark. A little more serious than the mark of Zorro. It preferred a piece of face but would settle for a chunk of finger; either would do so long as it came with a little red sauce. Wisely, after deciding upon the bird's new career, its owner kept the creature double-caged. It would not do to have corpses piled around the cage with the intended target not in attendance.

If Nicole's sister had not gotten engaged, it would have stayed a pet at least until its bad temper outweighed its great beauty and Nicole decided that a long bird nap would be best for all.

For almost a year, starting soon after Penny's engagement, it had been fed a diet composed of highly toxic South American poison-dart frogs, acquired illegally and at great expense. They were minced in a food processor, then mixed and served with assorted seeds and fruit. Although the poison had no apparent effect on the parrot, it completely permeated its system. It was in the blood, bones, beak, and the rest of its parts and pieces, probably the squawk, too. The bird was so toxic it was unsafe to let it breathe on you. It was nurtured and prepared to be a gift. A gift for the less than pretty and more than overweight, but fabulously wealthy, Miss Penny Poundwaite. It was to be a post-wedding gift but not too post—it wouldn't do to have the union exist overlong.

Miss Nicole Poundwaite was sure that her sister, her only sister, the one who inherited all the money from their otherwise wonderful daddy, Bucknell "Buck" Poundwaite III, would just love the parrot. She couldn't help but want to give it a big kiss at first sight. The parrot's limited vocabulary, the one phrase it had learned to speak so clearly and beautifully, should help things along: "Kiss me, baby."

None of this would have been necessary if the first Buck, the judge, her great-grandfather, had not decided that the firstborn child would inherit everything, followed by the firstborn of the firstborn and so on to the end of the Poundwaite line. The marriage was not a threat; mates of a Poundwaite had no claim to the fortune. The judge had blocked access except by blood, but offspring—a nephew or a niece—would close the door to Nicole

forever. It would be much better to be the surviving daughter, inherit legally, and funnel the fortune down her limb of the family tree.

Nicole's plan, though long in preparation, was to be short and simple in execution. The day before the newlyweds returned from their honeymoon she would drive to the estate and release the parrot in the family's aviary. The aviary was an enormous facility, and the Poundwaite collection of exotic birds was famous among private collectors. The next day she would call Penny and tell her about the new addition. Penny would be delighted—she was a real bird lover. She would rush into the aviary to see for herself, and the fatal dose of South American frog juice would be delivered by carrier parrot. "Kiss me, baby." Penny would be unable to refuse. Nicole was so happy with her plan that she decided to go shopping for a new black dress for the funeral.

Nicole's fortunate day finally arrived. Thirty days might seem a little long for an ordinary honeymoon, but the Poundwaites were far from ordinary. The beautiful surprise had been secreted in the aviary late the night before with none of the household staff's being any the wiser. Plump Penny was due home that afternoon, and Nicole's palm itched to pick up the phone. She danced around her apartment, skipping and twirling but keeping her eye on the clock, rushing it on so she could make her call. At moments she felt so happy with herself she almost fainted.

Finally it was time. Nicole dialed her sister's private number, but instead of Penny, the phone was answered by someone who sounded efficient. The efficient person explained that madam was taking some medicine for a cold, but if Nicole would wait, she knew her sister really wanted to talk with her.

At last Penny was on the line, and Nicole hastened to welcome her home and tell her there was a beautiful new present waiting for her in the aviary. She should go see it immediately. But Penny interrupted to tell Nicole that she couldn't possibly go into the aviary until she was sure she wasn't contagious. It would be terrible to introduce foreign germs to their wonderful pets. She then told Nicole to sit down for the fantastic news she had to tell. While on her honeymoon she had lost twenty-five pounds, and best of all, Nicole was now an aunt. Fin (formerly Finstanton Poole but now Finstanton Poundwaite; it was common knowledge that many lusted after the Poundwaite name, but there was no record of any Poundwaite's ever desiring or agreeing to part with it) and she were just thrilled with how they had kept her pregnancy secret from everyone. Didn't Nicole think it was just the most wonderful news she'd ever heard? Why not come out to the house right now and see her new niece Dimella? Nicole said she would call right back and quickly hung up.

Of course sparks do not shoot out of a person's eyes, smoke does not pour out of one's ears, hair does not stand straight out in every direction, and a scream is never so loud that nearby firehouses send out the firetrucks to locate the disaster, but if such things did happen, they hap-

pened now. Nicole took large handfuls of hair and pulled them down around her ears while she stared at a blank spot on the wall. She appeared to be frozen in this position for over an hour. Her eyes were small red slits that seemed alive but scary and far away.

Slowly her eyes became round, clear, and very bright. A smile started and then spread across her face. She released her hair and patted it down around her head. Her thoughts started to arrange themselves like a shopping list, or steps on the stairway back to her chosen path: Poor Penny has a cold. Poor Penny should have some chicken soup. Nicole knows just the chicken to use. Little Dimella should probably have some broth. With a little luck that s.o.b. Finstanton will have a drumstick. A loving sister can do no less.

Step number one, get the chicken back in his cage. This was the moment the parrot was demoted to lowly chicken status. Nothing more than a chicken in fancy dress. Although it was now only a chicken, it was still dangerous, and hopefully as lethal as all get out.

The double cage was still in the aviary along with lots of other cages used to transport the birds to shows and to the veterinarian. Getting Soupy—the parrot had now acquired a name—into the cage would not be easy, but Nicole knew she was up to the task.

She would call her sister, apologize for having had to hang up so abruptly, and invite herself out to see her new niece tomorrow afternoon—and by the way, darling, I'll bring some chicken soup to make you better.

Now there was no extra time. She had to get out to the estate after dark and slip into the aviary; that part would be easy. Then she had to get Soupy into his cage without getting kissed; that part could be tricky. Then drive back to the city and stop at a bookstore for a cookbook, another easy part; go by a grocery store for the ingredients, more easy stuff. Come home and kill the bird (another tricky part), and then just follow the recipe. Nicole thought to herself that this was probably more work than Buck the First did to start the family fortune. After it was all over, she wouldn't have just inherited the fortune, she would have earned it.

She considered what to do for protection during the first tricky part, and the answer flashed in her brain like a neon sign: wear your fencing costume. She headed for the closet. She had everything she needed, gloves, padded suit, helmet, and face shield.

She was not worried about finding Soupy in the aviary when she entered; he would announce himself. "Kiss me, baby." She would approach him, he would approach her, and before he discovered there were no soft places to remove a piece from, she would grab him and shove him through the double doors of his double cage.

And it went just that way. Everything smooth and problem-free just as Nicole had imagined. She made her stops on the way home, deciding at the bookstore to go with a basic down-home American cookbook.

The plan didn't all start to go to pieces until after she was home and

deciding how to kill the bird. She couldn't blow him apart with a shotgun because she needed him mostly intact when he went into the pot. She couldn't just stick her arm into the cage with a knife and fight a duel to the death with him. It might be her death. She couldn't give him a piece of rope and expect him to hang himself.

After pacing around the apartment for a while, she went out on her balcony and sat looking at the city while she waited for a revelation, a solution to the problem of death without jeopardy. But there were no more neon flashes in her brain, no brilliant insights, so she put on a fencing glove. She planned to haul him out of his cage, slap him down on the cutting board, and lop off his head with a cleaver. Simple and direct, very little pain on his part, and the job would be over. Then into the pot for a night of slow simmering.

It might have gone that way, too, if Soupy had not been on his guard. He liked the aviary, being moved there was fine with him, but being kidnapped at night by a beast that didn't even know it was being bitten had terrified him, and now he was ready for battle.

The first surprise Nicole got when she pulled Soupy out of the double cage with her protected arm and hand was how easily he twisted completely around in her grip. The next surprise was the three claws sinking into her left breast. The end of her nose was removed so cleanly it was almost painless but very bloody and shocking. It caused her to drop the cleaver, which, being very sharp and falling just so, opened the femoral artery in her thigh and left her with the right to claim only nine toes. Her last sight as she fell to her knees was of a large green, blue, and yellow chicken flying out her balcony door into the autumn night. It appeared to have her nose in one claw and her toe in the other. Her last thought was how such a simple plan could go so wrong, and she was sure she would need those parts returned.

Nicole was discovered the next evening when her sister sent someone to find out where she was and if she was all right. She had apparently died from shock and blood loss. The wounds might have been self-inflicted. But then, where did her missing parts go? A detective was assigned to the case, but he didn't know where to start. It looked as though she had started to make soup and things just went really wrong. No one thought to check for poison; if they had, that would really have complicated the case. As it was, the detective had a cookbook open to a chicken soup recipe, ingredients on the counter, and a dead cook with parts missing. All this in an apartment that was locked from the inside and without a chicken on the premises.

Several ornithologists stationed along the East Coast flyway to watch the southern migration of Canadian geese reported sighting a beautifully colored parrot flying along with the geese and keeping up very well. Why such a bird would have gone north in the first place was a real mystery but, they noted, it was headed home now.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Hulton Getty/Tony Stone Images

The sands of time are running out. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "July-August Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the February Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 237.

Kidnapped

Jas. R. Petrin

If you can believe it," Pete Melynchuk told them, his toothy sneer emphasizing his lack of credulity. "I'm not sure I do, but some idiot's grabbed Wolverton." He slapped a scrawled note down between the beer glasses, his thick fingers fanned over it. "He actually had to think we'd want to get the big dope back."

Wilmer studied him. "You're kidding."

"I'm not kidding."

"Is that a ransom note?" Chuck asked.

"No." Pete knuckled the paper. "It's a few things I scribbled down. A few things the guy on the phone said to me."

Gazing back at him, the grizzled faces of Chuck Lang and Wilmer Gates were inscrutable.

Chuck said, "So let's get this straight. Some nut's kidnapped Wolverton, he wants to make some kinda deal with us, and you agreed to go along with it, yes?"

"Not right off. I laughed out loud at first. Thought it was a gag. Then I said that even if it was on the level the guy could hang up right then because we didn't want Wolverton, I said. Nobody wants him, I said. Why would they?"

Wilmer nodded with complete understanding. But Chuck hunched forward narrowing his keen eyes suspiciously.

"What do you mean by 'not right off'?"

"Huh?"

"You said 'not right off,' so I'm guessing that you finally did agree to somethin'. I'm guessing that you told him we would love to have old Wolverton back."

For a moment Pete looked sheepish—or as near to it as his hard-boiled features could get. He took a mouthful of beer, stalling a moment.

"What happened was the guy cornered me. I didn't know where I could go with the thing when he hit me with it, but I'm thinkin' fast. And one thing I'm figurin', jeez, when you get right down to it, nobody wants to see old Wolverton get hurt."

"Why not?"

Again Pete was nudged off-kilter.

"Well!" he said, casting about for an arguable reason. "Because!" He glared defiantly.

"Hurt?" Wilmer put in, curious.

"The guy got snarky. Said if we don't take him seriously, he'll cut somethin' off of Wolverton and send it to us in a cardboard box."

"Ouch!" said Wilmer, grimacing. Then, with interest, "Cut what off?"

"Use your imagination."

"It would have to be something," Chuck pointed out flatly, "that we'd recognize."

Wilmer looked disappointed. "That would be his nose."

"He'd need a packing crate for that beezer," scoffed Pete, "not a lousy cardboard box." Then he said, "But there's no point discussing it because we aren't gonna let it happen—are we?"

The answer to this question could not be hurried. They took their time over it, and Chuck ventured cautiously, "Maybe you oughtta tell us exactly what we'd have to do."

"I'll tell you what we *don't* do. We don't tell the police."

"You mean Chief Robideau?"

"Who else? And a couple of other rules the guy has. We don't get cute. We don't think too much. We keep our mouths shut and follow instructions."

"That's more than a couple," Chuck Lang noted dryly.

"At least four or five," Wilmer agreed. "Don't get cute, don't think, keep our mouths shut, wait . . ."

"Will you pay attention?" Pete swept up his scrap of paper and thrust it irritably into his pocket. "The last bit is important. We have to stay in touch with this guy or we're not going to know what he's up to. When he contacts us, he'll call us here at the Netley, which means one of us has got to be here at all times."

"Me," said both Chuck and Wilmer on top of each other—the beverage room of the Netley Hotel being their favorite home-away-from-home anyway.

"We'll decide later who does what. He'll phone when he's ready to tell us how to deliver the ransom."

"Ha!" Chuck said. "Now we get to it. What ransom?"

Stony-faced, Chuck waited for an

answer. Wilmer likewise. Pete cleared his throat dramatically and folded his arms above his belly.

"The ransom," he informed them with great gravity, "is Rolly Torvalson's office assistant."

Rolly Torvalson was the town manager, a short and aggressive little man who flitted like a piranha among sharklike movers and shakers. Seeing Chuck and Wilmer absorb this information with faces as blank as two plates, Pete added, "I know it don't make sense. You figure a kidnapper'd want money. But then I don't see this guy as the brightest candle on the cake, neither."

Wilmer scratched himself behind the ear. "What's an office assistant when it's at home? Does he mean Rolly's secretary, or just what exactly?"

"The way he explained it, it's where Rolly keeps all his records."

"His musical records?"

"No, you kumquat! His record-records. All his messages, phone numbers, appointments—stuff like that."

"Well, it's a good thing he don't want money," replied Wilmer, with a deft move appropriating one of Chuck's beers, "since money is somethin' we don't have a whole lot of."

"We don't have Rolly's record-records neither," Chuck reminded him savagely.

"So we'll get 'em." Pete looked irritated. "Come on. What's the big deal?"

"The big deal?" Chuck's eyes blazed. "The big deal is this. After closing time those town offices are shut up tighter than a clam's bo-

hunkus. And I don't see us humpin' some bulky filing cabinet out the front door in the middle of the day. It's not like lifting a bottle of after-shave from the Rexall, you know."

Pete looked smug. "Then you'll be happy to hear Rolly don't keep his records in a filing cabinet. No, sir. He's a bleeding-edge kinda guy. He has the latest technology."

"And what's that?"

"An electronic gadget. A little doo-fus, fits right in your pocket, you store all your data and info in it. According to the guy on the telephone, Rolly Torvalson carries one around with him at all times."

Chuck pinched his nose, sat there holding it between his fingers. "I thought a thing like that was called an organizer or somethin'. Listen, who the devil is this guy?"

"I guess I should ask him to fax his credentials," Pete replied with sarcasm. "He calls himself the Sandman."

"The Sandman? What does that mean?"

"How should I know?"

"He ought to call himself the crazy man."

Pete feigned surprise. "Oh, you think that, do you?"

Wilmer said to them, his somber expression lending weight to his words, "The sandman, when I was a kid, was this guy who put people to sleep."

Police Chief Robideau hung up the phone, shoved his chair back, and went to stare thoughtfully out his office window along empty, sun-washed Burton Street. There was-

n't much happening today in End of Main's business section. No traffic moved there—which was just as well. With the plague of potholes in the streets these days, the traffic that ventured there did so at its peril. In his field of view was one very significant example—a flagged-off, crumbling patch of pavement the size of a bomb crater. Other, smaller holes were visible. Rolly Torvalson, town manager, was plumping for a hefty rise in taxes to get ahead of the game.

The call the chief had just taken had been from a local street person named Ginger, of no fixed address. Folks called her Ginger Rogers because of her claims to have been a professional hoofer in her time, which, if true, must have been about a hundred years ago in the chief's estimation. Any vestiges of a dancer's lithe figure were camouflaged under the five or six layers of grungy clothing she slouched around in.

Her query was plain. Did the chief know the whereabouts of her friend Wolverton—another town character. He seemed to be missing. Was he locked in the drunk tank, maybe?

The chief was well acquainted with Wolverton, a taciturn old toss-pot only a few dollars away from being a street person himself—saved by the fact that he had an income of sorts, a small disability pension that allowed him to maintain a room at Mrs. Larsen's boardinghouse and a table at the Netley Hotel, his favorite watering hole.

The chief did not think Ginger's concerns amounted to much, but having nothing better to do—no international drug cartel to roll up, no

mass-murderer to track down on behalf of the citizenry—he telephoned Ellen Larsen, and she told him, sure, if he thought he had to, he could come right on over. But he had to come now. She was heading out to bingo just as soon as she got through with the dishes.

Navigating amongst the street repairs, Robideau made for Mrs. Larsen's. It was a narrow-shouldered pseudo-Victorian place, a style of architecture that had sprung up everywhere before the first war. Since then, like many of its neighbors, it had become a rat's warren of tiny rooms. Pulling up out front, the chief glimpsed a face peering from behind a curtain. Mrs. Larsen. She didn't miss much despite her devotion to housework.

He found her in the kitchen sorting paper plates, stacking some on the counter, firing others into a garbage bag. All of them were used. Every so often she whisked crumbs from one of the keepers with a paper towel.

"I see you believe in recycling," Robideau commented.

"At today's prices you do what you have to." She was a stocky, unyielding woman with the demeanor of a pugilist. "'Course, you can't do nothing with the gunky ones." A catsup-stained plate sailed into the bag, followed by a frown.

Then, as though an alarm had been raised, she glanced up sharply. "You weren't sent here by the Board of Health, I hope?"

The chief reassured her, asking the tough old gal when she had last seen her lodger Wolverton. Not for several days, she informed him.

"Is that unusual?"

"Not really."

"So where might he be, do you think?"

"Ask his pals."

"I will. But first I want to make sure that he isn't moping around here, ill or something."

"He isn't."

She held a plate up to the light for closer scrutiny, then said as if she had only just thought of it, "Could be he's with his new chum, I suppose."

The chief was interested. "Tell me more."

"Some man come by for him three, four days ago. Sunday afternoon. When I seen the guy, I'm thinking, well, here's an improvement. Look's like Wolverton is moving up in the world."

"And why did you think that?"

"It was the cut of the guy. He was different from those other bums Wolverton likes to hang around with."

"In what way?"

"Clean, for one thing. Well-laundered. He didn't have that gunky look to him, like you could knock a dent in a trashcan with a pair of his trousers—which is how the rest of them look, as far as I'm concerned."

Robideau cleared his throat. He wasn't sure how one might frame that distinguishing feature on an all-points bulletin.

"Can you describe him?"

"I didn't see his face. I was upstairs looking down from the window, and he had a peaked cap over his eyes. His collar was turned up, too, almost like he didn't want to be recognized. They met in the street."

She described a burly middle-

aged man dressed in gray slacks and a blue windbreaker. He'd worn dark glasses and a blue baseball cap.

"What sort of vehicle did he have?"

"Can't say. If he had one at all, he must of parked it farther up, 'cause I didn't see it. They stood at the gate yammering away for a minute, then walked off together towards Burton Street."

That was all she could tell him about the man. Robideau got from her a description of what Wolverton had been wearing, for what it was worth, then went back to his car and drove away, casually watching for a man in a blue baseball cap who didn't look too gunky.

"There's a catch," Pete Melynchuk told them, returning from the hotel lobby where he had been talking to the Sandman on the telephone. Both Chuck and Wilmer groaned audibly so that Pete rumbled at them, "Keep your pants on!" He sat down. "It seems we can't just lift the doofus off of Rolly the way we figured, the problem being that Rolly can't know anything about it. At least not right away, he can't. The Sandman don't want him to know what's happening till he's finished making a few arrangements."

"Fine," sniffed Chuck. "And how do we manage it?"

"I know." It was Wilmer, his baggy eyes shining with anticipation. He didn't care much for Rolly Torvalson. He made a popping sound with his tongue like a wooden mallet striking a block of wood. "We'll knock him out."

"What good would that do? He'd wake up right away, wouldn't he?"

"Not if I do it."

"I'll knock *you* out!" Pete snarled. "Now, listen up. *I* got an idea."

Chuck and Wilmer listened.

"This Sandman guy gave me a description of the doofus he wants and said that they sell 'em right here in town at the Office Outfitter store. So here's the plan I came up with. We lift a brand-new one from the store, then pull a switcherooski on Torvalson. He don't suspect nothin'. When he goes to use the thing—hey!—it don't work right. So what's he gonna think?" The two other men shrugged. "He's gonna think," Pete explained in a patronizing tone, "that he did something wrong. Wiped everything out somehow. It won't occur to him it's a different machine. Not unless he checks the serial number, which he won't have no reason to do. The last thing he'll think is that someone switched his machine for a brand-new empty one."

"He might figure it out," said Chuck.

"Why would he? When people steal something, they don't leave behind another something that's exactly like it. There'd be no point."

Chuck drummed his fingernails.

"It might work."

"Of course it'll work."

Wilmer's head bobbed. "It would fool me."

"Oh, well then, I'm really sold," Chuck said.

"So far," Chuck Lang grumbled at Pete, "I don't like this plan. Why's it me that has to climb up here on top of the Office Outfitter and squeeze down a vent?"

"Because you *can* squeeze down it. You got no hips. You're built like a snake with an eating disorder—that *analrexia*."

"It's not *analrexia*."

"It would be in your case." Pete was impatient.

"Wolverton's skinnier than I am."

"Now, why didn't *I* think of that? Except that Wolverton is God-knows-where, hangin' from his thumbs while the Sandman throws darts at him, for all we know—and you're here."

"He's still skinnier than I am."

Pete glared at Chuck. "You know, when all this is over, mission accomplished and all that, I'm afraid I'm still gonna wind up in the slammer."

"How do you figure?"

"Because I'll of murdered somebody—probably you!"

It was nippy up there on top of the building, a cold breeze driving relentlessly off the lake over the flat, graveled roof. The town slumbered around them. A gibbous moon hung in the sky, casting a wan, ghostly luminescence over the gable ends and peaks of Burton Street, dimly lighting the harbor front, the nearer cottages, and a dark expanse of surrounding countryside.

Chuck said, "All that I'm sayin' is, I'm taking the risks. There's Wilmer on his duff at the Netley watching TV and waiting for the phone to ring. *You're* not exactly stickin' your neck out. An' I got to climb down this vent!"

"I'll stick out whatever I have to when the time comes. I always do. But tonight you're the one on deck. Now help me with this thing."

Chuck reluctantly aided Pete in hoisting the bulky fan housing out of its frame. Pete had already removed the long galvanized screws that fixed it in place and had unfastened some clamps to slacken the armored power cable. Neither one of them had brought gloves, and the cold metal numbed their hands.

With the plenum out of the way, Chuck skeptically probed the revealed opening with the feeble beam of his torch. The light was orange, the batteries were so weak.

"I bet you it's grubby down there."

"If it isn't, it will be," said Pete, "soon as you arrive. Now listen, I know all about this place—I did a roofing job here once. This here's a five foot drop. At the bottom you got a clean-out plate that they use to vacuum out the ducts—pops off when you push on it. That gets you into the attic. Then you poke around under the insulation and you'll find a trap that opens into the rear service area. It's jammed with boxes you can use for stepping stones. But go easy. The place ain't built too good. Put your foot wrong, you'll fall through and kill yourself."

"Thanks for telling me."

Chuck eased himself gingerly into the opening. With his feet touching bottom, his face was at a level with Pete Melynychuk's boots. He bent his knees cautiously and slowly sank out of sight. His voice rose out of the opening with a hollow, reverberant ring.

"Are there rats down here?"

"Only one."

"When I get inside, you're real sure I can pinch this thing?"

"Sure I'm sure. I cased it out."

There's one in a display cabinet at the back with no alarms on it, nothin' to worry about—this is End of Main, not New York, Chicago. Check the model number, then pocket the thing. Now, stop stalling. We gotta hustle. For all we know the Sandman is knocking divots out of old Wove with a weed-whacker."

Pete leaned against the chimney and took another slug from the bottle of cheap wine he'd brought along. Down in the vent Chuck popped the clean-out plate free and began to worm his way through the opening.

As it happened, Wolverton was fine so far. In fact, by his own standards, he couldn't have asked for better. He wiped burger grease methodically from each finger onto his shirt, shoved the Fat Boy take-out box aside, and with a contented sigh reached for the cold beer that he held pinned between his two knobby knees.

From a few feet away, the Sandman watched him through dark glasses. He said with a voice that betrayed no evident emotion, "I'm glad you're taking this so well, my friend. Now, if your buddies come through for you like they're supposed to, I won't have to keep you here much longer."

Wolverton shrugged. Fine by him. Just keep the free beer and burgers coming.

"If you're finished," the Sandman told him, "you can watch TV again."

He stepped behind Wolverton's swivel chair and swung it around to face an old TV sitting on a stack of beer cases.

As the Sandman began to hand over the remote control, a news item winked onto the screen. A local talk show host with a gooey expression was making a comment about the crumbling town infrastructure, and as she introduced her guest, the camera panned left to reveal Rolly Torvalson, who had an even more gooey look on his face.

With a snarl, the Sandman winged the remote at the screen.

Wiktor Hacek was a self-made man. Starting out as a typewriter repairman, he had risen over the years to become owner of the Office Outfitter store—it was an achievement, and he was proud of it. But today he was as hot as a pistol. He couldn't stand in one place he was so hot. At some time last night his establishment had been broken into, violated and robbed. It was infuriating. He would finish one incensed tirade in his Eastern European accent, then stalk off across the roof, turn on his heel, and come storming back again.

"What are things getting to in this town! What do we pay you for, Chief Robideau, when crooks are breaking into our business premises, looting and thieving whenever they feel like it?"

There was no point arguing. Wik was not in a mood for it. He had built this business, aisle by aisle, and he was furious and had a right to be. He had to get it out of his system.

"Such things never used to happen here. Now it is practically as bad as the city. Just look!" Wik kicked the open vent frame with a

polished loafer. "Taking the place apart. These are expert criminals. Am I going to have to keep a vicious guard dog up here on the roof from now on?"

"With all respect, Wik," the chief interjected, "I don't think this was done by expert criminals." He watched closely to gauge the effect of his words. "Any professional would know better than to try to walk between the rafters of an attic. This burglar fell right through. It's a wonder they were able to get back up on their feet and escape." He overrode Wik's instant rebuttal. "Also, any professional worth his jimmy-bar would have cleaned out half your stock—at least all of the pricey stuff—and from what you're telling me, you're only missing one item."

"Only one item?" The store owner's eyes blazed furiously at Robideau's thickheadedness. "Only one? That unit item is a Pocket Ultra, the most popular unit in my entire stock. Only a professional would've known its value and gone straight to it in the way that he did." He shook his finger in the chief's face. "I want that unit back, and I want it back now! And I also want this damage repaired."

"What about insurance? Are you covered?"

"Oh sure. Go and get the insurance money. As if my premiums are not high enough!"

The chief gently shifted Hacek to one side. He had just noticed something. It was a bottle, partly concealed behind the chimney stack. He picked it up, sniffed the neck, and read the label. The brand was

Big Gun, a local product, possibly the cheapest wine that money could rent. He turned to Hacek.

"Do your employees, to your knowledge, ever slip up here for a snort sometimes?"

"Never! They are honorable people. Besides, they couldn't do so if they wanted to; there are no stairs. They would have to do like the burglar and climb up on garbage cans. But you're changing the subject."

The chief worked the bottle into his jacket pocket. "I don't suppose you have another . . . er . . . unit like the one that was stolen . . ."

"A PDA, Chief Robideau. Personal Digital Assistant. That is what it was."

"Right. And the question is, do you have another like it in your store? I'd like to see the thing so I know what I'm looking for."

"Another like it? I am afraid not. I had only that one unit left." He flourished his hand. "I will give you a brochure to look at. That is the best that I can do."

A work crew was arriving to put the ductwork back together. Suddenly it was growing crowded up there. Leaving Hacek to rail at someone else for a change, the chief clambered cautiously back down the ladder to the parking lot.

He felt sorry for Wiktor, but it wasn't his place to sympathize. It was his job to locate the culprit. He let out a dry laugh under his breath. This was typical. Weeks slipped by with nothing more to occupy him than a few barking dogs or some hell-raising teenagers, but then, out of nowhere, an interesting puzzle materialized. The robbery didn't

amount to much—at the most, maybe a thousand dollars plus some damage. But Robideau wondered why the thieves had taken only that one particular item and ignored the rest.

And then there was Wolverton. He was still missing. It wasn't like him to disappear. You could practically make book on his showing up at the Netley bar every day. And now an empty Big Gun wine bottle appears at the scene of a crime, and that was a curious thing. There were few persons with constitutions hardy enough to voluntarily ingest this particular product, but someone who could, and repeatedly did, was the missing Wolverton, along with his pals. In fact, the little group was famous for it.

So what did it all add up to?

At the moment he didn't have a clue.

"I warned you to watch where you stepped," Pete Melynychuk scolded, "but do you listen? Oh no. You come clod-hopping back through that attic, practically stomping along with your big trotters, and so—boof!—down you go through the Sheetrock. It's darn lucky you didn't break the doofus."

"I managed to break both my legs," Chuck Lang said, "although I don't suppose that matters to you very much."

"You only broke one of 'em, the other one's just sprained."

"Oh, right. I feel much better now."

"Anyways, you're all patched up, aren't you? The walk-in clinic did a pretty nice job on you. Now let's get

back to business. What about Wilmer's question?"

Wilmer had come up with a poser, putting it to Pete and Chuck with an air of gravity: how did they know that, soon as they handed over the doofus, the crazy man wouldn't go ahead and bump off Wolverton anyhow?

Chuck resettled his plastered leg with a grimace of pain. "I guess we don't know the answer to that, do we? Only the crazy man knows for sure." He shot Pete a narrow look. "You seem to have all the answers. Don't you have a suggestion?"

"Nope. Not a one."

The doofus was in a plastic bag on the table between them. Every few moments one of the men would poke a finger into the bag and take a gander at it, fascinated. The little high-tech piece of equipment was as foreign to their normal experience as if it were a phasor gun from the starship *Enterprise*.

Wilmer cleared his throat. "I just came up with a thought."

"I figured you might." Pete gave Chuck a nudge.

"When we drop off the doofus, we hang around for awhile and wait for the guy to show up. When he does, we tail him. If we do that, I bet he'll lead us straight to wherever he's got Wolverton stashed."

Pete studied his beer, chin in his hand. Scratched the glass with a thumbnail, then looked inquiringly at Chuck.

Chuck sniffed. "I dunno. It could be dangerous. If the guy's armed, he could blow our heads off."

Pete needed a shave, his fingers rasped in his beard stubble. "It's an

interestin' point, though, and we may not have much choice. We can't trust the guy to do what he promises, so we're prob'ly gonna *have* to follow him no matter what."

"And if he spots us?"

"Then like you say—he could blow our heads off." Pete scowled. "Look, I don't have *all* the answers!"

"That was my answer," Wilmer reminded them. "And I got another one, too."

Pete groaned.

"Hear me out. Just listen, both of you. If you're worried about being spotted, all we got to do is wear disguises."

"Oh brother." Pete dropped his face into his hands.

They had the dropoff point covered perfectly. Whoever the Sandman was, he was not an experienced crook. He had chosen a poor spot for the handoff in Pete's estimation, having to retreat from the area in one of two directions, north or south—or head straight out into Lake Winnipeg. So they stood a pretty good chance of tailing him. Chuck would drive the vehicle, of course, seeing as he couldn't do much else, and was waiting up the street in Pete's uncle's cousin's old rusted crew cab while Pete and Wilmer stood at the rear of Al's Gas-O-Hol. From this point they could remain out of sight and yet have a decent view of the action.

Pete adjusted his fake whiskers.

"I feel like one of the Dalton gang."

"Do I know them?"

"What you know," said Pete, "isn't

worth talking about. Where'd you say you got these things?"

"At the Dollar store, two bucks and tax."

"If you got them at the Dollar store, how come they cost two dollars?"

"I don't know, it's how they figure it—you pay one dollar, and then another dollar." Wilmer tugged at his own fake beard, a black Vand dyck. "You guys owe me for it. And two bucks for the glue."

Following instructions received from the Sandman, they had placed the doofus in a white plastic bag, then stuffed it into the trash container on the corner of the street. A real concern was that some street person might root through the barrel and discover the thing before the Sandman picked it up.

Wilmer suddenly grunted, threw a hip check into Pete, and directed his attention with a jerk of his chin. "That'll be him—coming there in the truck."

"How d'you know?"

"'Cause I know what folks drive around here, and that's a truck I never seen before."

It made sense. Pete himself had a broad knowledge of the vehicles in End of Main, who owned what, and who drove it. It was an education quickly gained when you had nothing to do but watch cars go by every day.

And this particular truck was distinctive. A powder blue and gray Silverado. Extended cab, magnesium wheels, aluminum running boards. Very pricey wheels.

"Whoever he is," muttered Pete, "he ain't hurtin'."

The truck slowed and rolled by slowly, made a U-turn at the war memorial, and came trundling back again, its big three-fifty cubic inch V-8 grumbling. The windows were tinted so dark that it was impossible to see the occupants. And to Pete and Wilmer's astonishment, it was Wolverton who hopped out, delved into the trash container with a long, thrusting arm, extracted the doofus, and hopped back into the Silverado.

The Silverado then roared off, leaving both men staring after it, dumbfounded.

They didn't have time to discuss it with the crew cab screeching up right then, only time to pile in and hang on for dear life as Chuck punched the accelerator with his good right foot.

"Was that who I thought it was?" he asked in astonishment.

"What do you think?" demanded Pete. "That there's two Wolvertons in the world?"

"You think the Wove's in on it?" Wilmer was breathless. "You think him and this other guy cooked the whole thing up?"

"Wolverton couldn't cook up a pot roast," snapped Pete, adding scornfully, "And what would he want with some electronic gadget? What would he do with it if he had it? Take over the world? We all know Wolverton couldn't take over the Elks Club if we swiped him an atomic bomb."

Wilmer shut up. Chuck took corners at tire-torturing speeds, dodging crumbling pavements, keeping the Silverado in view without approaching it too closely. It was lead-

ing them out of town, making south for the marshes. After a five minute sprint down highway blacktop, they left asphalt for gravel, the roar of the old truck's holed muffler joined by a thunder of churned-up stones. Normal speech in the truck was almost impossible.

"Hadn't you better slow down?" hollered Wilmer. His glazed eyes, sunken and hollow, framed by the wispy and fatty fake whiskers, lent him the look of a cartoon hillbilly.

"And lose him?" yelled Chuck. "I don't think so."

They ran out of gravel and plunged down a trail that was simply two ruts in the mud leading into the trees. A sudden rise lifted the entire truck off the ground, and they all shouted "Whoa!" as their heads grazed the ceiling. They entered the woods, where branches from encroaching jack pines slapped and crackled against the doors.

"You're gonna kill us!" Wilmer brayed.

"*I'm gonna kill you,*" Pete shouted back at him, "if you shove that bristle-brush goatee up my ear one more time!"

"Shut up, guys, I think we're coming to something!" Chuck began to slow the hurtling vehicle. They all looked and saw what he was talking about. A spidery tower stood above the trees holding a TV antenna against the sky. "Better leave the vehicle here and walk in," Chuck advised, and he braked and steered the truck into the undergrowth.

With the engine shut off, the silence was sudden and eerie. The forest instantly became their world, hemming them in with greenery on

all sides. Only the trail gave relief to the eye, wandering away through the trees and curving out of sight. Somewhere a raven squawked. The forest echoed like a cave.

"Right," said Chuck, as if he had done his part. "What now?"

"Now we sneak up on that house, or shack, or whatever it is up there, see where Wolverton is, and find a way to rescue him." Pete said the words with determination but made no move to get out of the truck.

Chuck smirked. "Oh, so *now* we're gonna figure out that bit."

"It didn't look to me like he wanted rescuing," mumbled Wilmer.

"What he wants," Pete growled, "doesn't matter. He's gonna get rescued, and he's gonna like it!"

Chief Robideau stopped in at the Netley, hoping to encounter one of Wolverton's buddies and run some questions by him. But he was out of luck. Not one of the gang was at their usual table, and the bartender couldn't tell him a thing.

So he ordered a beer, sat down, and studied the brochure Wik had given him.

The Pocket Ultra seemed to be quite a gadget. There wasn't much in the way of business chores the little machine couldn't handle. An address book and phone directory allowed quick sorts and searches. A spreadsheet and job jar—things to do, people to see. It managed e-mail, offloaded from a computer, stored it, and allowed you to compose replies. It held six thousand addresses, five years of appointments, a thousand to-do items, a thousand

memos, two hundred e-mail messages—it was a wondrous machine.

It did, however, have one drawback, which, as a cop, Robideau perceived immediately. It was small and expensive, and thus likely to be stolen. And it grew in value as you entrusted more information to it, increasing your liability at the same rate. You might not carry a lot of cash on you, but this tiny thing with its capacious memory left you vulnerable to a crippling loss.

The chief put the brochure aside. What he wanted was an actual machine to inspect. One just like it. A picture was fine as far as it went, but it was a poor substitute for the real article.

Suddenly he sat up straighter. Wik Hacek had told him that the stolen machine was the only one he had *left*!

That must mean there had been others. That he had sold a few.

Robideau called Hacek. When he put the phone down, he knew who the most recent Pocket Ultra customer had been.

Rolly Torvalson, town manager.

Rolly received the chief grudgingly.

"Like I told you, chief, I can't demonstrate the thing. It isn't working. For some reason it locked up on me, so I can't show you what it does, only what it looks like." He led the chief down some stairs to a basement office. "I'm going to have to get it repaired. I'm lost without it. It's got my appointments in it, my contacts, and e-mails. A complete record of everything I've been doing in the last year."

There was a computer in the room, a large desk, an I-Love-Me wall with a lot of pictures showing the town manager cheese-caking with local celebrities. Rolly picked up an object and passed it to Robideau, a gadget smaller than the chief had imagined—less than pocket-sized—with a tiny screen and surprisingly few buttons on it.

The chief studied it, turned it over in his hand, then measured Torvalson with a probing gaze. "Has it ever locked up on you before?"

"Never."

"So what makes you think that's what it did this time?"

"Well! I can't get into it, now can I? What else could have happened? I must have pressed the wrong key."

Robideau put the gadget down and stared at it.

"The information stored in the thing. Is it valuable?"

"Of course it's valuable." Torvalson seemed to reconsider that remark. "Valuable in the sense of town business."

"Valuable enough that somebody might want to steal the information in it, and not simply the machine?"

Torvalson's eyes opened a little wider. Apparently he had not thought of that.

"Do you have the sales receipt from your purchase?" Robideau asked.

"I darn well better have. It's a legitimate business expense." Rolly pawed through a desk drawer. "Sure, here it is."

He produced a sheet of paper, computer generated and folded twice. It showed the charges, some warranty information, and the se-

rial number of the item. The chief picked up the gadget but found no serial number on it. He then sprang the battery compartment open, and there it was in raised characters on the plastic. It was a number different by three digits from the one stated on the invoice.

"Mr. Torvalson," the chief said, "you may be the victim of some strange goings-on."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm not sure yet. But this is not your machine."

"Of course it's mine!"

"See for yourself."

He let Torvalson compare the numbers.

"But this is crazy. I paid good money for this."

"I don't doubt it. Wiktor Hacek confirms it. But this particular machine was stolen from Wik's store during a break-and-enter, so how did it wind up here?"

Torvalson's gaze held Robideau's. "What the hell are you saying? That I had something to do with robbing Hacek?"

"Not at all," said Robideau. "I'm not saying that. But we have a puzzle here, you can see that. Your own machine is apparently missing, and one that was recently stolen is in your possession."

Torvalson closed his eyes, sighed, then opened his eyes again.

"Look, chief, I don't know what you're angling for, but I don't like what you're insinuating. Maybe Hacek screwed up the serial numbers, got them crossed somehow in his own records. Maybe he wrote my number down wrong—"

"I don't think so. It's probably

scanned in with the bar code." Chief Robideau shook his head. "This whole thing doesn't smell right. Unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"Unless your machine somehow was *accidentally* confused with the stolen one. You crossed paths with the thieves somewhere, and somehow the two machines got mixed up."

Rolly snorted. "That couldn't happen."

"You sound very sure."

"I told you how valuable this thing is to me. I keep it in my possession at all times."

The chief paced the room for a moment, then said, "Where do you carry it?"

"In my briefcase, usually."

"And would you leave your briefcase in your car? I mean, say, if you stopped at a grocery store or something?"

"If I did, I would slip it into my coat pocket. And besides, I haven't stopped at a grocery store in the last twenty-four hours. I haven't stopped anywhere. Except . . ."

The chief's ears pricked up.

"Yes?"

"Well, I did drop in at the Netley yesterday on my way home from the office. For one quick drink. But I took the machine inside with me, like I just said."

His eyes moved in his face, the mind behind them searching. "Let's see, I sat at the bar with Prancing Al Evans—don't tell him I called him that!—and we talked about football, and politics, and—"

"Go on."

Torvalson's face looked suddenly

troubled. "I—I did get up to go to the men's at one point . . ."

"And left your coat behind?"

Torvalson swallowed. "Well, jeez. If you can't trust Al Evans, my god, who can you trust?"

"It's not Al I'm thinking about," the chief said.

The telephone rang. Torvalson snatched it up irritably.

"Who is it? What do you want?"

He listened, then seemed to wilt. He put the receiver down. At Robideau's quizzical stare, he said, explaining himself, "Those damn telemarketers, they'll drive you nuts. They want to clean my carpets—again!"

"I know how you feel," Robideau said.

The phone began ringing again. Torvalson didn't move. He didn't look well. There was a clammy sheen to his face.

Pete elbowed the door open, slid from the seat, and stood beside the truck. He had to glare at the others before they got out and joined him. What a sight they made. Chuck hobbling on his crutches, which he had dragged out of the bed of the truck. All of them bristling with fake whiskers. Chuck complained that the tips of his crutches were sinking into the ground; Pete told him he could remain with the vehicle, but Chuck wouldn't hear of it: stay by himself in the woods with a madman on the loose? No thanks! So they set off together along the trail, Chuck and Wilmer hard on Pete's heels. Pete stopped after a dozen steps and wheeled on them.

"Back off! You're givin' the guy too much to shoot at!"

"Whaddaya mean?" Chuck was righteously miffed. "We're behind you. That gives him *less* to shoot at."

"Yeah, but at my expense! When I want to catch slugs for you, I'll tell you. Now, stop breathing down my neck." They continued on around the bend, then once more Pete halted, this time so suddenly that Wilmer ran into him.

Fifty yards away, through the dense foliage, they saw the glinting shoulder of a small building, apparently a cottage. Beyond it was the sheen of water. And there was movement there, too. Somebody walking. Wilmer began to frame a hoarse question, but Pete waved him vigorously into silence. They stole forward even more cautiously, footfalls cushioned on the loamy ground.

"Do you have to creak like that?" Pete hissed at Chuck.

"It's the crutches."

"*T'll* give you crutches!"

Then Wilmer gasped. "My god, it's Wolverton again!"

It was indeed Wolverton. Looking as if he hadn't a care in the world, strolling back and forth in a clearing, almost sauntering. He wore his usual vacuous expression and was holding something up to his face.

"What's he doin'?" whispered Wilmer.

"Can't tell for sure," replied Pete, "but it looks like he's eatin' something." He squinted. "It looks—it looks like a chicken leg!"

"Jeez!"

"Keep a look out," Pete said.

Carefully they scrutinized the surrounding area. Beyond Wolverton was the apparent cause of the deep ruts in the road—a two-axle gravel truck and a small excavator on a flatbed. Near both machines was a long, narrow hole in the ground with a mound of displaced earth beside it.

"What's up with the tractor?" Wilmer hissed.

"I dunno." Pete pulled at his whiskers; man, they itched. "Digging a well, maybe? And why is the Wove out walking around? It looks like he's waiting for something. The question is what?"

"He's not waiting for a bus," a voice said almost at their backs, and the blood seemed to seize in their veins. "He's been waiting for you."

A man wearing dark glasses and a turned-up collar stepped out of the trees with a shotgun cradled in his arms. He was sturdily built and moved with a confident stride as if he had learned long ago that people would not mess with him. He held the gun loosely, a man comfortable with firearms, not aiming it directly at them but near enough to get his point across.

"I figured you dopes might try something like this, so I watched for you. Had you pegged on the way out of town."

Pete was embarrassed. "You—uh—diggin' a well?"

"That'd be none of your business." The man moved the gun barrel. "Get down to the boathouse."

To reach the boathouse they had to cross the clearing. Chuck, who was closest to the excavation, put a crutch wrong and gave a sudden yelp. He had lost his balance. Before

he could slip into the hole, the Sandman caught his arm. Wilmer, desperate to save himself, clawed the air with hooked fingers, catching the Sandman's cap and dark glasses and ripping them from his face. The men found themselves held in the gaze of the most determined eyes they'd ever seen.

"Good one," breathed the Sandman. "Now you're dead!"

The Sandman lined them up against the boathouse, seated on the ground, Wilmer and Pete on their haunches, Chuck with his plaster leg flung out straight in front of him. He lashed their arms securely to the rails of a ladder that hung there on steel hooks. Then he went off to the house.

"This is great!" groused Pete Melnychuk, "just great! Keep a look out, I said. I swear you guys should be lightbulb changers, the way you're always screwing things up!"

Nobody argued.

"It's ridiculous," Pete continued, "us bustin' our backsides to rescue that damn Wolverton and him lounging around here like he's on vacation. Now it's *us* that needs rescuing! It's like some kinda bad dream!"

"You think you got a bad dream," moped Wilmer in a resigned tone. "I pulled his shades off. Now he's gonna kill me."

"He's gonna kill all of us because of that, you dumb twit!"

"You know, fellas, I think I recognized the guy," Chuck remarked quietly. He was a pathetic sight, his once-pristinely white cast all mud-

died up and shoved out in front of him. "I seen him in Arborg. Some kind of contractor. Sewer and water, I think. Maybe that explains the tractor."

"It don't explain nothin', who cares where he's from? And that ain't a well, it's a trench, and it don't go nowhere, so what's he dug it for? And why did he get us to swipe Torvalson's doofus?"

"I'll tell you why," the Sandman said. He had an unnerving facility for creeping up on them. He came around the rear of the truck, eyeballing it as if gauging its proximity to the trench.

"That doofus, as you call it, has enough information in it to send your town manager to the penitentiary. Which is where he belongs, you can take my word for it." As though it proved his point, he held the gadget up on display between thumb and forefinger.

"He keeps records. Always a problem for crooks. Names, dates, all the boring details—payoffs, bribes—of every rotten deal he's been involved in. He has to track who owes him, and how much. So he turned to this gadget, a little box he could get rid of quick, toss it away if he ever had to. Only he can't do that now. *I've* got it."

"Are you sayin', then, that you're his partner?" Wilmer asked.

"Partner? No. I just did business with him. I had to. Every contractor around does. There's only so much work out here in the boonies, and Torvalson controls most of it. You play it his way, or you get no business. And something is always better than nothing. One of the best

contracts I ever had, I got from Torvalson—hauling gravel for the resurfacing of Grindstone Road.”

Pete’s ears pricked up. “That’s not a town road.”

“You’re right. It belongs to Natural Resources. But Torvalson had the connections—he always does—and he landed the job for me.” The Sandman laughed humorlessly. “Do you know where most of that gravel went? Most of it wound up on the driveways of his relatives and friends, and a big whack of it went out to that new cottage he’s building. Didn’t cost him a dime. He let the taxpayers spring for it.”

“So what you’re sayin’ is, Rolly controls things.”

“It’s a fact. He’s done it for years. And now he’s got a new scam going. You want to know why the town streets are falling apart? Ask Rolly. For the last few years he’s been using substandard materials for street maintenance. Now it’s about to pay off. He’ll launch a big street renovation program—the taxpayers are already begging for it—and what will he use? Substandard materials. Then in a few years he’ll have to do it all over again. The gift to himself that keeps on giving.”

“So what are you up to, now you got the doofus? You gonna put Torvalson in prison? Make public all his rotten deals?” Despite their predicament, Wilmer was fascinated.

The Sandman shook his head. “I’m afraid not. That might’ve satisfied me once. But not now. Things have changed.”

“Then . . .”

“I wanted the gadget because I know he’ll do anything to get it back.

Even drag himself out here to this godforsaken place.”

“And when he does?”

The Sandman seemed about to answer, then changed his mind. “If you’re lucky, you might live long enough to find out.”

“What’s he done to you?”

“To me personally?” His face filled with bitterness. “That isn’t relevant. It’s what he did to someone else that matters. That’s the real reason we’re here.”

He stalked away.

Pete turned furiously on Wilmer. “Don’t you ever stop, you dimwit? Prying secrets out of that guy! You sounded like a police detective. You might as well take his rifle and shoot us yourself!”

“Sorry,” said Wilmer. “But I had to know. He’s got something personal against Torvalson. He’s gonna do somethin’ terrible, and we’ll be accessories for helpin’ him do it.”

“Wilmer’s right,” said Chuck. “We better stop this guy.”

When the chief left the town manager, Rolly was like a man who’d been slapped with a shovel, shaken and pale. And the telephone was ringing again. What was that about? Who was phoning him? Not a carpet cleaner, the chief was pretty sure.

He called Prancing Al, who corroborated Rolly’s account of his visit to the Netley, though Al couldn’t remember if Rolly had hung his coat on the back of his chair or not. But if he had, Al admitted, almost anyone could have rifled his pockets, people crowding past them

there at the bar almost constantly.

Remembering the wine bottle, the chief asked about Wolverton. Al said he didn't remember him being in the place that day, but he'd seen Wolverton's soulmates, Pete, Chuck, and Wilmer, there. In fact, after Rolly arrived, they'd approached the bar, pressing up around everyone and making small talk.

It was thought-provoking but not conclusive. The chief smelled smoke but couldn't see any fire. Perhaps what he needed was a better vantage point.

At four o'clock Torvalson emerged from his house looking harried and distracted. The chief was waiting up the street for him.

Rolly followed the directions he had been given over the phone, a route that took him south to the marshes. He had a bad feeling about this but didn't see that he had any options. He wanted his information back. If it became public, he was ruined. And by God, it wasn't fair! You worked hard, you hustled your backside off, and then somebody showed up to mess it all up. Well, we would see.

The road got so bad he was beginning to think he might have taken a wrong turn; then he saw an old club cab pulled off the trail. He continued on. He stopped when he saw the man with the gun.

Torvalson got out of his car and reluctantly approached the man, who was holding the shotgun on him. The face behind the weapon was hard to make out, hidden behind dark glasses, a peaked cap pulled down low, and a jacket col-

lar pulled up high. The man lifted the gun barrel casually to indicate that Rolly ought to stop where he was. In a cracked voice Rolly stated the obvious.

"I'm here."

The man nodded. "And the next question is, do you know why?"

Rolly shrugged. "I'm here to get my organizer back. I brought the money. On the phone, you said—"

The man snarled, making him jump.

"Never mind what I said!"

He shoved the gun barrel forward.

"Get moving."

Rolly obeyed, his pulse hammering at the back of his throat. He'd known it, he'd bloody well known it! This was not going to be as straightforward as the caller had made out.

He was herded past a woodpile, around the end of the cottage, and into a clearing with a freshly dug trench situated smack in the middle of it. A truck was backed up to it—a very large truck with about nine yards of sand in its box. Rolly blinked nervously, glad of the reassuring weight in his coat pocket.

"I'll give you a hint," the man said. "Think back. Ten months ago at Main and Burton Street." He prodded Rolly. "Sewer repair job! What happened?"

Rolly searched his mind. He couldn't think. What did the guy want from him? He replied, "There was a repair job, yeah. But big deal. So what?"

The gun barrel dug into him hard, and Rolly screwed his eyes shut against the pain, knowing he'd definitely said the wrong thing. Then

another voice spoke. Rolly looked around. They weren't alone.

"That's the job where a guy got killed, I think."

Rolly turned to where the voice was coming from and, for the first time, noticed three men sitting spraddle-legged, their backs to the boathouse, arms behind them and lashed to a ladder that hung from the boathouse wall. He knew them. They hung around the Netley a lot. But here they looked different, all wearing scraggly facial hair. One of them spoke again. "There was an accident. A trench collapsed and buried a workman."

"Now do you remember?" the man with the gun asked Rolly.

Rolly did remember the accident. A young fellow had died. The labor board had censured the town for failing to provide adequate safety precautions, but lucky for Rolly; nothing more had come of it—due in no small part to a few favors Rolly was owed. But at least Rolly now knew who his captor was.

"Bill Kirkland!" he gasped. The gunman pulled his dark glasses off. "Jeez, Bill, now listen—" Rolly argued.

"No, you listen! It's one thing to cut back on materials, use seconds, thin out the concrete, then pocket the difference. Nobody gets hurt. But you said you wouldn't take chances with safety, especially the safety of the workers. Hell, *I'm* a worker! And that trench collapsed on Burton Street because you didn't provide the proper shoring materials. I checked. Three-inch rough-cut planking called for, and you supplied some milled one-inch crap."

"Inch and a quarter, Bill. It was inch and a quarter."

"*Three inch was called for! And paid for, too! Where'd it go? Into that mansion of a retirement cottage you've been building up at Sans Souci, that's where!*" The Sandman—Kirkland—wheeled on the others as if to a jury. "The man who was killed that day—Edward—was my son!"

Nobody spoke. Kirkland had a wild, unreasoning look. When Rolly found his voice, it was shaky. "Bill," he said, "like I already told you. I didn't know anything about that at the time."

"You know it now."

Kirkland fumbled for something inside his jacket, found it, and brought it out. It was a Bible. "After the inquiry—what a joke that was!—I saw it would be up to me to hold you accountable. And I saw right off how to do it, too. But I had two choices. I could drag you into a court of law, where half the people in it would likely owe you a favor—a new garage floor, a new driveway or something—or . . ."

"Or what?"

"Or I could go back to basics, back to where the law derives from in the first place." He slapped the Bible, a Gideon Bible. "I realized it that same night, after the inquiry, sitting there going crazy in my motel room."

Now Rolly was scared. "Oh now, listen, Bill—"

Kirkland ignored him, flipped the Bible open, drew the string marker back, and began to read in a judicial voice: "*And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for*"

life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe . . .

Listening to this litany made Rolly's hair stand on end. It was clear things were not going to end peacefully. The Heckler & Koch 9mm in his jacket pocket was going to have to work hard—seven rounds and one in the chamber. He hadn't counted on playing to a gallery. These damn Netley guys, witnesses all of them.

Kirkland snapped the book shut and beckoned at the cottage. Wolverton came out the door. "Start up the truck," Kirkland told him, "and engage the hoist. Wait for my signal. Stop when I tell you to."

Wolverton looked troubled but obediently climbed up into the cab of the truck.

"I want to explain something," Kirkland said. "I want you to know how my son Eddy died. Sand was mounded up right next to the trench. When the shoring timbers collapsed, twenty cubic yards of it fell in on top of him. They started digging, of course, but they weren't going to make it. It only takes a few minutes to smother a man. Eddy never had a chance."

He gestured at the truck. "I've only got nine yards of sand here. But I think it ought to be enough." He barked at Wolverton. "Get at it!"

Wolverton obeyed.

The engine started with a roar. When it evened out, he engaged the hoist, which rose slowly with a whining sound, everyone watching it. At about a thirty degree angle the sand shifted suddenly and slid back

against the tailgate, and Kirkland shouted, "Whoa!"

He turned to Torvalson.

"Get down into that trench!"

"Not me, Bill. No way I'm gonna get down in that hole."

"You're getting in that trench if I have to shoot the legs out from under you!"

The guy was insane. There was no doubt about it. Could he get his automatic out before this nutcase started blasting? Torvalson took a long step backward. Give himself a little working space. Kirkland raised the shotgun menacingly.

"Put the gun down," someone said.

It was Chief Robideau, stepping out of the trees.

Well, that was it. That was the limit. The next thing you know, the Chinese army would be here.

Kirkland only nodded. He kept the shotgun on Torvalson. "Well, well," he said with a knowing smirk. "Here's one of your pals, Rolly. Come here to show everybody why I can't trust the law."

Rolly Torvalson was starting to think there might be a way out of this yet. He felt a mood change come over him. All his confidence came surging back.

"Chief, arrest this crook. He's a thief and a killer."

"Oh, am I?" Kirkland said. "I haven't killed anybody yet. But you have because you were greedy. You're the worst kind of crook!"

"Oh," sneered Torvalson, "and you're the best kind?"

"I've got principles!"

"Oh, really! Thieving, kidnapping, attempted murder. If those are

your principles, pal, you're welcome to them."

"Give me the shotgun," Robideau said.

Kirkland hesitated. He looked at the truck, ready to drop its load, at the trench so like the one his son had died in, at the Bible still clutched in his left hand. Then he slumped. He couldn't go through with it. Maybe if it had been just him and Torvalson here, the way he'd planned . . .

He turned the shotgun around and handed it to Robideau.

"And free those men!"

Kirkland obediently pulled out a pocket knife and cut the twine that bound the men to the ladder.

An instant later, Torvalson made his move. Brought the automatic out in one quick grab. He had survival on his mind. Blast the gadget into smithereens, and if Kirkland caught a slug in the process, well, a man was allowed to act in self-defense, wasn't he? He knew where the gadget was—in Kirkland's side pocket. And that's where he sent his bullets.

Kirkland screamed and dropped his Bible. The chief swung the shotgun around to cover Torvalson, but Kirkland was suddenly in the way, lunging at Torvalson. With his left hand he struck the release lever of the truck's tailgate, threw his arms around Torvalson, and dragged him into the trench. Sand cascaded over both of them. In seconds they were gone from sight. Where the trench had been moments before, there was now a mound of sand, waist-high.

"Quick!" ordered Robideau. "Get them out!"

There was a gravel scoop hanging on the truck that the chief tore down and began to dig with. Wilmer darted into the boathouse and came back with a spade. Pete and Wolverton used pails. After five minutes of digging they found blue denim and cast their tools aside, all of them furiously scrabbling with their hands.

The denim was Kirkland's. He was unconscious but breathing. His hands were around Torvalson's throat. They pulled him out of the trench, laid him on the grass, and then brought out Torvalson, the chief puffing air into the town manager's lungs while Pete Melynychuk pumped his chest. They worked on him until their arms were sore.

When the beer was brought to their table and the full glasses lined up in front of them, Pete, Chuck, and Wilmer took in the sight with awe and some mystification:

They turned their eyes on Wolverton. "Wove," Pete Melynychuk said solemnly. "Did you order this?"

Wolverton bobbed his head, smiling.

"Well, then, thanks, Wove," Pete said. "But you didn't have to. We were happy to rescue you—weren't we, guys?" He kicked Chuck and Wilmer under the table, bruising his toes on Chuck's plaster.

Wilmer yelped and said, "It was a slice, Wove. Get kidnapped again soon."

Chuck, swallowing a grimace, said, "I was happy to practically give up my life for you, Wove, and get maimed, even though you were having such a wonderful time."

They each grabbed a beer.

After a long swallow, Chuck said to Pete, "What about Robideau? Is he gonna make somethin' out of that job we pulled?"

"That job *you* pulled," Pete reminded him. "I felt him out about that, and he said he probably won't spend much time on it on account of Wik Hacek got his property back. He said it would be nice, though, if someone patched up Wik's ceiling. I told him you'd be happy to do it, Chuck, just as soon as you're clear of that plaster trouser-leg."

"You're thoughtful."

"I am, aren't I?"

"Don't forget," Wilmer reminded them, "you two guys owe me five bucks. Two bucks each for the masks, and another buck for—"

"Yeah, yeah, for the glue!" Pete glared fiercely. "And you owe us each five hundred bucks."

Wilmer put down his glass.

"What for?"

"For the skin grafts we're gonna need to fix what that glue done to

us!" Pete touched the welts on his face. "Contact cement! What's the matter with you?"

"It was the cheapest."

"*You're* the cheapest! Now, shut up about your five bucks." Pete turned to Wolverton. "I gotta know somethin' so I can sleep at night. That guy didn't have you tied up or nothing, Wove. He even brought you into town with him to pick up the doofus. What's up with that? How come he trusted you?"

Wolverton's big empty eyes shone as he turned his not so very formidable intellect to answering the question. Finally he leaned towards Wilmer, who listened, then told them, "Wove says it's just a way he has with people. Why he knew we'd be comin' to rescue him, had a feeling about it, and wasn't worried about it. People like him, he says. They like to take care of him, he says."

Pete continued to glower at Wolverton. After a while he said:

"If you can believe it."

Another Day in Paradise

Mike Reiss

The snake and I were strolling through the jungle, naming the last few things that hadn't been named. "Look at that beautiful creature," I gasped. "Let's call it a butterfly."

"Well, gosh, Adam, it doesn't really fly. It just stands around eating antssss," hissed the snake. "Maybe we should call it an anteater."

"That's a little on the head, don't you think?" I asked. The snake shrugged as best he could without shoulders, so I let him have his way. When we reached the clearing, an enormous beast came charging at us. It had thick gray skin and huge ivory tusks, and it bellowed through its long hose of a nose.

"What a monster!" I cried as we ran off. "Let's call it a butterfly."

"Fine. Whatever. Keep moving," panted the snake.

It had been decades since this snake had gotten us booted out of the Garden of Eden in a scandal that became known as Applegate. I was doomed to a life of sweat and toil, and he was cursed to slither through the dust on his belly, so we pretty much called things square. Since then I had raised two strong and handsome sons, he'd fathered about six hundred kids, and we sort of became friends.

The sun was beginning to set as we reached the safety of the sheepfold. My son Abel lay on the ground, eyes shut, blood trickling from his forehead. A large gore-soaked rock lay beside him. "Isn't that cute? He's napping," I whispered.

"He's not napping. He's dead, you moron!" snapped the snake. "By the way, I'm sorry for your loss."

"Dead?" I said. I'd never heard the word before. Up till then nothing had ever died, except maybe that frog I sat on in the tub. The snake explained the concept of death to me, and frankly, I didn't care for it. It sounded so permanent.

My wife naturally took the news very hard. "Eve, Eve, Eve, Eve," I consoled her palindromically. Ever since my first words to her—"Madam, I'm Adam"—these palindromes just tumbled out of me. "We're only a hundred and thirty years old—we can have more kids," I told her.

The only thing that brought her any comfort was my vow to solve this crime and bring the murderer to justice. After all, it was I who first discovered our nakedness in Genesis 3:7, or as I call it, The Case of the Missing Pants.

"I don't see what the big mystery is here," the snake told me later. "Cain clearly did it."

"Cain slew Abel? Do you know how ridiculous that sounds?" I snorted. "They're brothers!"

"Of coursse. He was jealousss," said the snake sibilantly. "Cain's been a handful ever since Abel was born. While you were raising Abel, Cain was raising as much Cain as he was able."

"Now you're just babbling."

The snake seemed to take offense at this. "I'll make you a little wager. If Cain's innocent, you can step on my tail. If he's guilty, I get to bite your butt. No venom, of course."

"Deal," I said, and we began our investigation. I first decided to examine the murder weapon, an eight pound, irregularly shaped rock. If only we'd known the kind of mayhem it could cause, we might have introduced some form of rock control. But now it was too late. There were tons of rocks floating around out there, and any nut could get his hands on one.

"I'm taking this weapon to the lab," I announced, and took it to a black Labrador retriever I knew. The lab had an incredible sense of smell, and after he sniffed the rock, he shot off at top speed.

The snake and I did our best to keep up. "He's picked up the scent!" I cried. "He's leading us right to the killer! He's taking us to—"

"Cain," said the snake smugly. The stupid dog had led us to the riverbank, where my son was obsessively scrubbing his hands over and over again.

"Still dirty . . . must get clean . . . dirty . . . evil hands . . ." said Cain. I smiled knowingly at the snake: could a boy with such good hygiene possibly be a killer?

"Cain, son, I have a question for you. Did you slay your brother?"

"Who, me? Huh? Kill Abel? Uh . . . no," he replied, and went back to washing his hands.

"Thanks for the cooperation, son. We won't be bothering you again." I headed for home.

"That's your investigation? One question?" said the snake.

"He said he didn't do it."

"You fuzz-covered, thumb-using, bipedal boob!" cried the snake. "Cain was lying!"

Lying? He was crouching, if anything. There was something here I clearly didn't understand. The snake explained it to me very, very slowly. "Adam, I hate to break this to you, but people don't always speak the truth. Like when Eve tells you you're a genius, or I say you don't need a shower. That's called *ly-ing*."

This certainly complicated my investigation. While I let it sink in, I suggested we question our next suspect.

"There are no other susssspectsss! There are no other witnesssssss!" sputtered the snake, spraying serpent saliva all over me. "You've spoken to everyone on earth!"

And that's when it hit me—the truth had been staring me in the face all this time, but I'd refused to see it. "You did it, didn't you, Snakey?"

"You got me," sighed the snake, hanging his head. "For no reason, I, a two pound snake, picked up an eight pound rock in my mouth and spit it at my best friend's son with enough force to kill him instantly."

It was good of him to confess, but it just didn't seem to add up. "Wait a minute—were you lying just now?" I asked. The snake nodded. On top of Death and Lying, I had learned about another ugly concept today: Sarcasm.

"Well, if you didn't do it, who did?"

A vein popped out on the snake's forehead and ran clear down the length of his back. "It was Cain, you warmblooded mammalian moron! Cain, Cain, Cain! How many times do I have to tell you—your kid is a maniac!"

"Cain? A maniac?" I palindromed. It was too simple, too tidy. There had to be a better solution.

That night I gathered Eve, Cain, and the snake by a cosy fire. The murder weapon sat in the middle of our tiny circle. "I suppose you're wondering why I gathered you all here tonight," I began. It was a pretty good line; I hoped someone could use it again.

"Who was the foul fiend who murdered Abel, who wiped out one-quarter of the world's population with a single blow?" I asked. "It wasn't the snake; he wasn't physically able. It wasn't Cain; he told me he didn't do it. I have no choice but to conclude that the murderer was . . . *you!*"

I spun around and was about to point at Eve when she spoke up. "Oh no, you'd better not be pointing at me," she said, wriggling her neck in a threatening way she'd learned from the snake. "If you ever want any more sugar, sugar, don't you dare point that finger at me."

"No, of course not!" I said. Eve smiled—crisis averted. I'd lied for the first time in my life, and it worked like a charm. If I'd only lied to The Big Guy about eating the apple, I'd still be romping nude in the Garden of Eden today.

"So, who *was* the killer?" said the snake, trying to ruin my moment.

"It was . . ." I looked around, desperately trying to find a suspect. "It was—the rock! It was not just the murder weapon, it was the murderer itself!"

"If I had a hand, I'd be slapping it to my forehead right now," said the snake dryly.

"Why would a rock kill our son?" asked Eve.

"Because . . ." I made a dramatic pause while I tried to think of a reason. "Because it resented Abel's ability to walk and talk and see and eat. Finally, in a fit of jealous rage, the rock hurled itself at Abel, killing him. Do you deny it, Mr. Rock?"

The rock said nothing. "I rest my case," I said smugly.

"Adam, you're a genius," Eve gushed.

I thought I had pulled it off—I had framed an innocent rock for murder. But at this point You Know Who stepped in with a tremendous roar of thunder. A lightning bolt ripped through the clouds and struck Cain with a blinding flash. When the smoke cleared, the word MURDERER was etched on his forehead.

"Talk about your deus ex machina," whistled the snake.

And that pretty much concludes The Case of the Dad in Deep Denial. It probably won't make it into the Bible, which is just as well, since it's plot-heavy and not at all edifying. In fact, if anyone ever writes another murder mystery, I'll be very surprised.

The next day I ran into the snake in the woods. Neither of us knew what to say. He finally broke the uneasy silence. "You got a name for *that*?" he asked as a delicate orange insect fluttered by.

"Tunno . . . hippopotamus?" I suggested.

"You're the boss."

There was another uncomfortable pause, and this time I spoke. "I admit it, you were right all along. I guess I'm not the brightest guy in the world."

"Yeah, but you're in the Top Five," said the snake.

"Thanks," I said.

"Sssay, Adam, I trust you remember our little wager," said the snake. To be honest, I had forgotten until I felt his fangs sink into my derriere.

"Oooo," I palindromed.

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The Sheep in Wolf's Clothing

Charlotte Skelton

“Whatever’s going on here!” exclaimed Gyrth as he maneuvered the cart carefully up the lane leading to Waking Church through the throng that all but blocked their path.

A large group of people were milling around outside the churchyard gate, the crowd spilling down the lane and jostling all around them. That there were so many folk about was not in itself peculiar. After all, it was Easter Day, and the whole village would be here attending church. What was so odd was that no one was actually going into the compound around the wattle and daub buildings that served as both church and home for the priest, Father Aidan. In fact, people were almost under the wheels of the cart in their anxiety to avoid going through the wicket gate. Gyrth stood up in the driver’s seat and tried to see over the heads of the crowd.

“Leave the horses with me,” Lady Eadgyth said, taking the reins, “and see what it’s all about, Gyrth, will you? They can’t all stay here. A child’ll be going under the wheels before we know it.”

Even as he jumped down to do her bidding, Gyrth grinned to himself. It was typical of his mistress to take immediate control of the situation and, with complete disregard for her position in society, also to

take the reins. It crossed his mind yet again to wonder how, although she herself never seemed very concerned about her status as the widow of an earl and a person of considerable wealth and importance, the fact was immediately recognized and respected by everyone with whom she came in contact. True nobility, he decided, wasn’t necessarily anything to do with “airs and graces.” It was definitely something that you were born with.

Unconventionally (and again typically), since there were no priory or monastic houses in the area, Eadgyth and Gyrth were staying with Stephen and his family, their hosts for this visit. Normally someone in Stephen’s position would have been overcome with the honor of having the Lady Eadgyth even visit his home, let alone stay there, but both Stephen and Eadgyth had seemed to accept it as a completely natural, everyday occurrence. Stephen had shown no signs of being overwhelmed when they arrived yesterday and had greeted them with a natural dignity that made Gyrth wonder. There was so much he didn’t know about Stephen. Perhaps it was the influence of the Bardic training he had apparently undergone years ago, for Gyrth knew that even now, in some parts of the country, bards were considered to be on a level with royalty.

Gyrth had recently had the opportunity to view royalty at first hand when, some weeks ago, King Cnut had visited Eadgyth at Maldon. Eadgyth's husband, Earl Harold, had been killed fighting for Edmund Ironside in the fateful Battle of Ashingdon almost four years ago. Cnut, the victor that day, had vowed to build a Christian church on the site of the battlefield as a token of reconciliation between himself, now the Danish king of all England, and his defeated English subjects. He had heard of Eadgyth's reputation as an intelligent, educated, and civilized lady whose wisdom and integrity were matched only by that of her late husband. Cnut had therefore asked if Eadgyth, representing the local English nobility, would like to participate in his gesture, designed as it was to bring peace and stability after so much bloodshed.

Eadgyth hadn't hesitated and had immediately offered to provide the floor tiles, saying that she knew of an excellent workshop locally where such things could be made. This, then, was the reason for their visit to Stephen, the foreman of the famous Wakering brickfield, as Eadgyth discussed the manufacture, design, and delivery of her generous gesture.

Being a person of some importance in Wakering, Stephen's family also attended church there rather than more locally at Southchurch. (As with most folk of the time, they still worshipped personally in the old way but thought it wise to publicly keep in with the Christian God, just in case.) They had been delighted when Eadgyth had decided

that she would attend the Easter Mass with them. The visit of such a gracious and noble lady was indeed an honor for all concerned, especially as Eadgyth brought so much business to the local brickfield and was renowned for her generosity.

The day before, they had cleaned up Stephen's cart for the journey and decorated it with flowers to celebrate the Feast of the Christ's Resurrection, Eadgyth helping along with everyone else. Easter Day had dawned fine and sunny, and they had left the paschal lamb roasting in its charcoal pit whilst they all traveled on to Wakering in merry mood as suited this most joyful of days. And now this!

Stephen fell in beside Gyrth as he made his way through the crowd, having signaled unobtrusively to his son William to hold the horse's head. They had no difficulty getting to the root of the disturbance.

"Over there, on the church door," said the first man they asked; "no one's going near that! Not even on Easter Day!"

Curiosity piqued, the two men made their way towards the door past the spring flowers that lined the pathway through the priest's kitchen-garden.

They smelled it before they saw it. Nailed to the church door, a piece of what was obviously flayed skin was beginning to glisten menacingly in the rays of the early morning sun. It was fairly large, about the size of a man's back. The edges were beginning to curl and discolor, and there were unpleasant stains on the door below it.

The color drained from Stephen's

face, but he stood his ground. Gyrth took a couple of deep breaths, thought he was going to be all right, and then vomited without warning into a patch of daffodils.

As he recovered himself, he was vaguely aware of a movement behind him. He straightened up and realized the Lady Eadgyth was standing there, calmly regarding the monstrous thing on the door.

"My lady!" he exclaimed, his mouth still foul from the bile. "Please! Go back to the cart, I beg you! This isn't for a lady's eyes!"

Eadgyth appeared not to have heard him.

"Go to the well over there, Gyrth. Rinse your mouth and splash your face. It'll make you feel better," she said with kindly concern. "What's this?" This last was addressed to Stephen, who seemed to have quicker powers of recovery than Gyrth.

"It appears to be skin, my lady," replied Stephen with feigned matter-of-factness, although the color of his face told a different story. "A couple of days old probably, from the smell. Not a very nice reception for the Feast of Our Lord's Resurrection!"

"Skin? What sort of skin?" asked Eadgyth curiously, taking a few steps forward.

"A Dane's!" came the dramatic answer from behind them. A man had just arrived and now stood inside the gate. He was dressed in his Sunday clothes and was obviously more prosperous than those around him. He spoke in a loud voice, wanting everyone to hear.

"And you shouldn't be going too close, my lady. It's not for a lady's

eyes. My quarrel's not with you. This is a local matter."

Eadgyth regarded the newcomer steadily.

"This," she indicated the thing on the church door, "this is the result of a *quarrel*?" Her voice, although calm, betrayed incredulity. "And you are responsible? And you are—?"

"Edward of Waking, my lady," the man replied, with a slight but courteous bow. "I'm a farmer. I farm the land next to the brickfields here in Waking from my lord and also land for sheep up at Hadleigh. What you see here is the final warning of a man hard pressed. The skin on the door belongs to the Dane I caught stealing my sheep a couple of nights since. It is meant as a warning." Edward turned and stared directly at a group of people close to him over the fence. "A warning to those, Matthew of Barling, who try to interfere with me and mine."

A tall, florid man with strikingly white hair stepped forward and gripped the fence, chin jutting.

"What's all this nonsense, Edward? What do you mean 'interfering'? We've done nothing except stand up for our rights. It's you interfering with us, more like! And this is what we're to expect every time you don't get your own way, is it?" He indicated the church door with its gruesome decoration. "You don't frighten me! And don't expect to bully me into backing down either."

At this another, much younger man with the same striking white hair, obviously the son of the speaker, stepped forward and took his father by the arm.

"Come away, Father. He's raving!

Anyone who would do a thing like this, especially on today of all days, must be raving. Leave it!"

"Why should I leave it?" responded Matthew angrily, shaking his arm free. "He started it! Falsely accusing honest folk like that! You all heard him!" He spread his arms, appealing to the surrounding audience. Then, suddenly turning back fiercely to his son, "And since when did you run away from a fight, eh? Whose side are you on?"

"Father!" The young man blushed and looked embarrassed. "Just come away, will you?"

Edward of Wakering laughed unpleasantly. "That's right, Matthew," he sneered. "Listen to your son. He knows what it's all about. Talking sense for the first time in his life!" and he stood watching mockingly as Matthew was led away protesting by his son and family.

The journey back to Southchurch was a thoughtful one. At Lady Eadgyth's suggestion, the Easter Mass had been conducted in the open air, no one being prepared to walk past the terrible object on the door to get into the church. "We will worship as our forefathers did," she'd declared, "under God's own heaven in the light of His blessed sunshine! With the spring flowers and the song of birds, what could be more uplifting, or teach us more clearly about the new life of the resurrection?"

Father Aidan, elderly and completely out of his depth, had gratefully concurred, and the proceedings had continued without further disturbance under the huge oak tree nearby.

"So," said Eadgyth when they were all sitting in the sunshine outside Stephen's house, waiting for the Easter meal and sipping from tankards of gently frothing ale, "what was all that about, Stephen? There's obviously a tale there, and no mistake!"

Stephen grimaced ruefully.

"Just local gossip, really," he replied. "That's all it was, until today. I never thought that Edward would go so far. We none of us like the Danes, me more than most, as you know, but I think flaying a sheep thief and nailing his hide to the church door as a warning to his neighbors is going a bit far, to say the least."

"Well, I don't mind gossip even if you do," interrupted his son William, "and I'll be happy to tell you what we know, my lady. We get to hear all the gossip because Edward's land joins the brickfield and his bondsmen are always blabbing. It's amazing how much they know about their master's business."

Stephen glared at him warningly, but William was oblivious to his indiscretion in front of Eadgyth, who naturally owned bondsmen herself. No power on earth was going to stop the flow of gossip once he'd got started. "Anyway, Edward's got a daughter," he continued, and then stopped, unsure of his ground and now suddenly aware of to whom he was talking. Eadgyth laughed.

"Ah! Now I see why you're so well informed. About your age, is she? Pretty?"

William blushed slightly but defended himself.

"Wouldn't matter now even if she

was," he began, but was cut short by his father.

"That's enough, William, I don't think the rest of this story is suitable for mixed company and especially the ears of a lady."

Eadgyth raised her hand. "After what this lady has witnessed today, I am sure she will hardly be shocked by gossip about a local farmer's daughter. Let me save you the embarrassment, Stephen, and make a guess about Edward's daughter. Let me see now," and she drummed her fingernail against her front teeth, regarding him with eyebrow-arched merriment. "What could a farmer's daughter possibly do that would cause so much local interest? Something so scandalous that it makes the fact that she's pretty become completely irrelevant to the local lads, like William here. Something that's too shocking for the ears of a lady. Ah! I have it! Could it be that she's expecting a baby? Is that it? She's expecting a baby and has no husband? Well, it's hardly earth-shattering," she continued, laughing at their shocked and incredulous faces, "very embarrassing and unfortunate for the family and so on, but an extremely common occurrence. One hardly has to be a genius to come to such a conclusion."

"Ah, but you don't appreciate the circumstances. It's just so deliciously *ironic*," replied William, greatly encouraged by the lady's liberal attitude. Stephen and Gyrth settled themselves back, arms folded in mock disapproval, and prepared for the worst.

"Edward of Wakering is a rather strange character if you ask me,"

began William. "He's widowed, with just the one daughter, Anne."

"She's certainly the apple of his eye," agreed Stephen, nodding.

"Spoiled like a rotten apple, more like!" replied William. "She's been treated like a proper lady all her life for all she's only the daughter of an ordinary farmer. I know Edward isn't a bonded man or anything. He's a freeman all right, paying his dues direct to the lord of the manor, with land here *and* up at Hadleigh for his sheep, and there's good money in sheep as we all know, but he's hardly *nobility*. Not like yourself, my lady."

Eadgyth acknowledged the compliment gravely, and William continued.

"Anne's always been treated like a real lady as I say, even taught to read and write. What good is that to a farmer's daughter, I'd like to know. Her father doesn't need to know how to read and write to run the farm and he's a man, saving your presence, my lady. Doesn't get the cows milked, doesn't that. All she can do is sew and read! Looked after hand, foot, and finger by the old man's bondswomen, she doesn't know how to do anything useful at all. And—this is the important bit, what's so ironic—she's never been allowed out anywhere on her own. Never into the fields or to the market or even to church without someone with her keeping an eye on her the whole time, just like gentry. And now she's in the family way and won't say who the father is!" William slapped his palms down on his knees in delight and leaned back, almost falling off the bench as he did so.

When he'd regained his balance, Eadgyth remarked dryly, "I can certainly see why you think it's so gossip-worthy, William. Very much a case of 'how are the mighty fallen.' But how is the farmer, Edward, taking it? If that demonstration in the churchyard this morning is anything to go by, the girl must be black and blue by now."

"Well," said William, leaning forward again, "that's what's so interesting, now you mention it. Bearing in mind the fact that Edward's always taking other folk to the manorial or ecclesiastical courts about one thing or another, he's being surprisingly lenient with her. According to Eric, who's Edward's body-servant, he hasn't beaten her or anything, just kept her within doors. There was a big row, of course, that's how the servants knew everything, because of the shouting, but he hasn't laid a finger on her. She won't say who the father is and that's that. Typical. She's never been made to do anything she didn't want to. Of course, Edward's bark's worse than his bite if you ask me. Always making a fuss over something or other,—trees overgrowing his land, fences not repaired and animals straying, and so on, but when it comes to his family, he's like a lamb." He paused. "Or at least that's what I thought until this morning. I'd have never had him down as a violent man, and as for actually killing someone, well, I just don't know what to think. Very out of character, if you ask me."

"Perhaps the strain of what's happened to his daughter has turned his mind," put in Stephen's wife Al-

ice as she strained more ale into the jug and began putting the food on the table. "Perhaps he just couldn't take any more."

"Then he shouldn't keep falling out with people," responded William tartly.

"Now, now," interrupted Stephen, "less of that. It doesn't behoove any of us in this family to take such an uncharitable attitude. Your mother is right. We all know what ordinary folk will do if pushed far enough. I don't have to remind you what happened in *this* family last Samhain, do I?"*

William turned red and looked miserably down at his feet. There was an awkward pause, broken after an interval by Eadgyth complimenting Alice on the delicious smell coming from the food and saying how much she was looking forward to eating meat again after the Lenten fast. The atmosphere lifted, and everyone began making small talk to cover the awkwardness that mention of last autumn's events had created.

Grace was said and the meal begun amid praise for the cooking. When all the bowls were filled and everyone had eaten enough to satisfy their immediate appetites, Eadgyth continued.

"So, William, you didn't finish telling us, what has happened between Edward of Waking and Matthew of Barling recently that has stirred up so much ill feeling? Edward said he had put the flayed skin on the door as a warning to Matthew. The

*See "The Samhain Skeleton," AHMM, November 1999.

result of a quarrel, I think he said. No half-measures there! What's their argument about?"

"Well, as far as I know," William answered, relieved to be forgiven, "it's to do with water rights up at Hadleigh. Edward has sheep there as I told you, but so does Matthew. You see, those two have been falling out over something or other for years and years. Although Matthew comes from Barling originally, he actually lives in Wakering now, on land that he farms adjoining Edward's, by the brickfield. They are always squabbling about this and that, common boundary fences and so on. But up at Hadleigh it's slightly different. Edward actually holds the land there from the lord of the manor, but Matthew shares the grazing rights over it.

"It goes back years, before Edward inherited the land. Edward's father was quite happy to let his neighbors share the pasture. After all, there's plenty for everyone. But Edward wouldn't have it. He tried to turn Matthew off, but Matthew went to the manorial court. It upheld Matthew's claim that, as he'd used the land for pasture continuously for more than seven years, he now held the right in perpetuity. Edward was furious and has been trying to think of a way of getting rid of Matthew's sheep ever since. He recently came up with the idea that although Matthew has grazing rights he doesn't have the right to the use of the stream to water his sheep. It's ridiculous, of course. But should he win, Matthew will have to take his sheep elsewhere.

"The case will come to the lord of

the manor soon, but in the meantime, it looks as if Edward has decided to play dirty.

"Mind you," William finished, still smarting from his father's reprimand and determined to be fair all round, "I wouldn't want you thinking that the wrong's all on the one side. Matthew and his family are hardly saints. His son—"

"Ah yes," Gyrth interrupted. "Now, that was odd, wasn't it, this morning, the way Matthew's son pulled him away from the argument? Matthew was really surprised. 'Since when did you run away from a fight?' he said. 'Whose side are you on?' I thought it was really odd at the time, and obviously so did Matthew. The lad didn't stand up for his father at all in front of everyone. He couldn't get him away quickly enough."

"There are several very odd things about what happened this morning," said Eadgyth, quietly. "That's why I'm so interested in the background story. You were saying, William, about Matthew's son? What's his name, by the way?"

"Rolf," replied William, "and you can see he's his father's son, can't you, with all that white hair. All the men in the family have it. Their hair is quite dark when they are very young, but as they get older, it gets lighter and lighter until it's white by the time they're twenty.

"Rolf was a real devil when he was younger. At one point his father despaired of ever keeping him from the hangman. In the end he sent Rolf to the monks in Barking to see if the monastic discipline would quiet him. He stayed for a

year, but in the end they had to send him back. That was last year. He was calmer after that, it's true, but that was because he was older and had discovered another outlet for his energies."

Eadgyth raised an inquiring eyebrow. William turned red and took a deep breath. He looked to his father for help, but none was forthcoming.

"Well, put it this way, my lady. The monks certainly didn't teach him celibacy! He sows his wild oats everywhere, does that one. Trouble is, no one will know which children he's fathered until they're grown. Then you'll see how much white hair there is all over the county!"

"And I suppose you don't ever sow wild oats yourself, William?" asked Gyrth with a straight face.

"Well, no, that is, well, yes, sometimes, that is—" and William was lost in confusion as the others all began to laugh.

"Never mind, William, we were all young once," said Eadgyth comfortably. "It's not fair of us to tease you so. What you've told me has been very interesting. It's given me a lot to think about. But not today! Today is Easter, and it doesn't do to dwell on such things today. Perhaps a walk after lunch, pick some primroses, and watch the new lambs? Much more suitable for a day like today."

Although Eadgyth and Gyrth were due to set off for home on the morrow, Gyrth wasn't exactly surprised when Eadgyth announced that 'as the weather was so pleas-

ant' she had decided to remain a further day or two. From there it was a logical step for her to express an interest in seeing the famous Wakering brickfields that supplied the beautiful Samian pottery, floor tiles, and roof tiles that she had purchased on such a regular basis over the last few years.

She proved an attentive audience, asking Stephen all sorts of questions and admiring his skill and expertise. Gyrth noticed, however, that she was equally fascinated by the neighboring landscape, asking Stephen to point out which land belonged to Matthew, which to Edward, and where their respective houses were. Gyrth decided that their prolonged stay might be more to satisfy Eadgyth's curiosity than to take advantage of the weather.

Stephen had been thinking the same. They were sitting that evening after supper, making easy conversation about nothing in particular, in the way of old friends, when he suddenly said, with a significant, slightly mocking tone to his voice, "So you found the visit to the brickfield interesting today, my lady?"

"Very," replied Eadgyth innocently. "I'm always fascinated to see age-old skills demonstrated. I'm particularly interested in the fact that your brickfield goes all the way back to Roman times. A wonderful tradition, of which you are a worthy successor, Stephen."

"Your compliment is much appreciated, my lady," responded Stephen gravely, "but as I was talking with you this afternoon, I felt that perhaps you were more interested in the surrounding countryside, in

the farmland, for instance? You obviously saw far more in the incident in the churchyard yesterday than we did. Perhaps you'd care to share it with us? Just in a spirit of idle curiosity?"

Eadgyth laughed. "Perceptive as ever, Stephen! Well, yes, there certainly are one or two things that puzzle me about yesterday. For instance, as Gyrth said, why was Rolf so eager to get his father away from the confrontation with Edward? Matthew obviously thought it was very strange and out of character. And where did the skin come from? By all accounts, Edward's not a violent man. It would, I imagine, take a great deal of skill to overcome and kill a Dane; I wouldn't have thought Edward had it. And where did the Dane come from in the first place? There aren't any Danish ships using these creeks for over-wintering, as far as I know."

"There are still renegade bands of Sea-Wolves without ships wandering the area," replied Stephen. "Perhaps he was one of those."

"Perhaps. All the same, I wish I'd got a closer look at that skin," said Eadgyth almost wistfully. "And then of course," she continued, "there is the most puzzling question of all. If this is the result of a personal quarrel between Edward and Matthew, why did Edward put the skin on the church door at all? Why not on Matthew's own door so Matthew would be sure the warning was meant for him? Perhaps—"

She got no further. A tremendous commotion suddenly began outside, the dogs barking furiously and the sound of running feet. The

heavy leather door-curtain was thrust aside unceremoniously, and a man burst into the house, out of breath, deathly pale, and obviously in a state of shock. The men of the household all sprang to their feet.

"Stephen! You must come quickly! Something terrible has happened in the brickfield," he began. Seeing Eadgyth he stopped and tugged at his forelock, panting. "Forgive me, my lady, for arriving like this. I hope I didn't frighten you," and he stood hopping from one foot to the other, his inbred fear of nobility just overcoming his anxiety to tell his news.

"It's hardly I to whom you should apologize," Eadgyth told him, "since it's not my house. But something terrible has obviously happened, so you'd better tell us all quickly. Out with it, man!"

"It's Edward, my lady," stammered the man, almost inarticulate with fear and distress. "He's in the brickfield. He's dead! He's been . . . sp—" and he covered his mouth with his hand and ran from the room. A moment later they could hear him retching in the yard.

"With your permission, my lady," said Stephen, gesturing firmly to everyone to remain indoors. He followed the man outside. Without warning a sense of foreboding suddenly gripped Gyrth, as if some nameless horror were clutching at his chest. His heart began pounding, and looking round, he could see that everyone else was affected, too. Alice moved over to Eadgyth and, without thinking, took her hand as she watched the door, eyes wide with fear.

"Dear God, not again," she whispered.

They listened to the muffled voices through the curtain for several moments, and then Stephen returned. "I'm afraid it looks as if the Danes have had their revenge on Edward for the death of their companion," he announced. "He's dead."

"What makes you think it was the Danes?" asked Eadgyth, but she too had suddenly gone very pale.

"Because only the Danes would carry out a spread-eagle," replied Stephen flatly, and he just managed to catch his wife as she fainted.

Stephen, Gyrrh, and William left the house soon after and made their way through the dark back to the Waking brickfield. Eadgyth had immediately taken charge of the situation, having sent Alice to lie down. She had quietly wondered at the dramatic effect that the mention of the spread-eagle had had on Alice but knew that this was not the moment to pursue it.

While the men had hitched up the cart for the journey to Waking, she organized the things they would need to take with them. She did not, Gyrrh noticed, suggest coming with them.

"I've found a big piece of homespun for you to take with you. You'll need to wrap the body carefully before you take it back to his daughter. I don't want her seeing him like that in her condition. Tell his bondsmen to get a coffin put together as soon as it's light. There are torches here, with flint and tinder. I want you to have a good look round while

you're there. We need to get to the bottom of this."

Although it was pitch dark and a mile away, the brickfield was very easy to see almost immediately. Dozens of flaring torches moved around in the darkness like fireflies, getting steadily bigger as they approached. Unsure of what to do, everyone had waited for Stephen's arrival; he was the foreman of the brickfield.

Stephen took control immediately, asking to be shown the body, but everyone present, mainly the serfs from the two adjoining farms, was staying well back at the edge of the field. They would only point in the direction of the drying sheds.

"Stay here with the horse, William," said Stephen grimly, and as William opened his mouth to protest, "and that's definite. If we find what I think we're going to find, I don't want you seeing it. There's been enough horror in this family to last several lifetimes. Stay with the cart, son," he continued more kindly, "and keep the horse calm. We'll need him soon enough."

At the drying sheds, where pottery was kept before firing, Gyrrh saw why Stephen had been so anxious to spare his son the sight of Edward's body. It was lying on its back, eyes open, staring up at the stars through the clear night air. The face held no expression—almost unbelievably in view of the savagery of what had been done to the body. The chest had been cut open from throat to stomach and the ribs partly forced up on one side through the hole, in an attempt to produce the

"wings" of the spread eagle. The whole scene was one of complete carnage. There was blood everywhere with a huge patch beside the head containing bits of bone and hair. An axe lay on the ground covered with bloody handprints.

Stephen stood staring at the body for several long seconds, his face a pale mask of horror. When he spoke, his voice was barely a whisper.

"I never thought to see this again, Gyrth, never. God forgive us, when will it ever end?"

"You've seen this before?" asked Gyrth, warned by some instinct that he was finally about to be taken into his friend's confidence about his mysterious past.

"Aye, I have," replied Stephen softly, bitterly, as they walked away, "in Wales when I was young." His voice slipped into the sing-song cadences of his Bardic training as the memories overwhelmed him. "The Danes came just before dark. My mother hid me, told me not to move whatever I heard. They took all the men for the slave market in Dublin. They killed everyone else, women, children, old men. By the morning they had all become spread-eagles, a red and white forest of bloody bones. There was nothing I could do. I just had to leave them. Leave them for the crows. I should have buried them. Somehow. But there were too many, and I was just a boy. I couldn't manage on my own. I just ran away, ran and didn't stop. I should have been one of them. Why did I survive? And I shouldn't have left them like that. I should have done something." His face did-

n't alter, but the tears flowed down his cheeks, unheeded.

Gyrth listened, appalled. He suddenly began to understand, with fierce compassion, a little of the mystery that surrounded Stephen, a Welshman in this remote corner of Essex, a little of the horror his friend had suffered as a boy and the guilt that he still carried. No wonder Stephen hated the Danes. No wonder he never mentioned his past. But he was such a gentle, kind man, loved and respected by everyone. How had he stayed sane? Such things would have driven most men to madness. What could he say to him now that would bring him comfort from such experiences?

"Stephen, friend," he began awkwardly, but Stephen suddenly shook himself and, with a great effort, became brisk and businesslike. The nightmare had obviously passed for now and Gyrth didn't want to do anything to bring it back.

"Gyrth, my good friend, one day I'll explain everything. To you and your lady mistress. I owe you that, I think, after all. But not now. Now we've a terrible murder on our hands, and someone's trying to blame the Danes. But it's not the Danes, not this time. Hate them as I do, I won't stand by and have them falsely accused and, more important, have the real culprit going free. So we need to get to work. Give me a hand, will you? We need to get Edward shrouded and home for a decent Christian burial," and with that he began to haul the cloth out of the cart.

What followed remained with Gyrth for the rest of his life. The

task of reassembling Edward's body into something approaching normality was gruesome enough, pushing the ribs back into place and binding the chest tightly with strips torn from the homespun shroud. But the flickering light of the torches and the story that Stephen had just told him made the whole thing into a macabre nightmare that never left him. He found that the only way to cope was to keep his mind busy or he would have been overwhelmed by it all. He must concentrate. Eadgyth would expect a detailed account of what they found.

"What makes you think this isn't the Danes?" he asked. "No sane, decent man would do something like this. It's the work of a fiend. Only the Danes, surely?"

"That's what we were meant to think, certainly. But whoever did this had only heard about the Danes and the spread-eagle from stories. They'd never witnessed it first-hand. For a start, Edward was knocked senseless, more probably killed, by this blow to the head."

"How do you know that?" asked Gyrth.

"Well, the fact that he's had his brains bashed out is self-evident," replied Stephen, grimly, indicating the mess that had been the side of Edward's head. "Why do that afterwards? But then there's the expression on his face. He definitely wasn't alive when the spread-eagle was done."

"I should hope not," responded Gyrth indignantly.

"Ah! But that's the whole point," said Stephen, setting his jaw. "A real Dane would have done it prop-

erly, with Edward still alive and conscious."

"You mean people are *alive* when that's done to them?" Gyrth sat back on his heels and stared incredulously at his friend. Now, only now, did he appreciate the full horror of the stories that he had heard since he was a child. "Surely not! Not even the Danes—" His voice tailed off as he began to feel extremely sick. It was obvious from Stephen's face that he was perfectly serious.

"You see, it's a test of the Dane's skill and bravery, that he can perform the spread-eagle with the victim still alive," Stephen continued. "The victim's pain is a sacrifice to their god of war. I know. I've seen it, the expression on the victim's faces. No. Edward was already dead when someone started the spread-eagle. He never knew anything about it, thank the gods. But someone wanted us to think it was the Danes taking their revenge on Edward for the skin on the church door. They obviously didn't know what they were doing, probably didn't realize how much blood there would be, and didn't realize how difficult a job they'd started. They didn't even have the right tool for the job." He indicated the axe, still lying on the ground. "That's no good," he said contemptuously. "It's for chopping wood. For the spread-eagle you need an axe with a much broader blade, like the ones the Sea-Wolves carry." And he shuddered involuntarily.

"The Lady Eadgyth has her doubts about that business yesterday, too," said Gyrth thoughtfully. "But if it wasn't the Danes, that means it's someone local. Someone

we know! Someone taking advantage of the skin on the church door to blame the Danes for killing Edward. How could someone local do something like this?"

"Well, to be fair, they couldn't, could they? They could only bring themselves to start the job and then lost their courage and bolted. That would also suggest they knew Edward. Things like this would be easier on a stranger, I imagine."

With the chest securely bound, they began to ready Edward's body for Christian burial, bringing his arms up to cross his chest before shrouding. It was while they were doing this that they noticed his hands. Edward's left hand was relaxed, but the last three fingers of his right were curled. Inside them was a tiny scrap of something white. Stephen removed it gently and put it in his scrip.

Finishing their task, they gently carried Edward's body across the field, Stephen shouting for more light. The body was loaded onto the cart, and accompanied by his serfs, Edward was driven home.

When they got back to Southchurch, the women were waiting for them, faces pale, eyes dark-ringed with strain and sleeplessness. Alice and Eadgyth were sitting holding hands by the fire. Mead was warming in jugs in the embers, and the new day's bread was ready for baking, showing how routine tasks had kept them occupied and calm during the long night. But such a night is often a watershed, when old painful memories are brought to the surface and can no longer be sup-

pressed, as the two men had found at the brickfield.

Here at home there was also a noticeable change in the attitude between the two women. Stephen saw it first. After his first draught of warm mead he said to Eadgyth, "So she's told you, then?"

"Yes," replied Eadgyth. "Although I had already partly guessed."

"Just as well, I suppose." Stephen sighed heavily. "I've tried to hide it, but there's no hiding some things, is there? I told Gyrth, too. So now you know my darkest secret, my lady, why I hate the Danes so much, why I left Wales, why I wandered these many years. You know now what sort of man I am, a coward who deserted his own at the time of their greatest need. I shall understand if you wish to leave as soon as it's light." The words were spoken with dignity but with the weary resignation of a man who has been deserted many times. But Eadgyth was made of sterner stuff.

"Is that what you truly think, Stephen? Then listen to me, for now is a good time to tell you something, in this time of no time, between dark and dawn. It is time that you forgive yourself for a shortcoming that exists only in your own imagination." She held up her hand for silence as Stephen opened his mouth to protest and continued, firmly and deliberately, holding Stephen's eyes with her own.

"You were a child, Stephen, not a man, when the Danes came. You obeyed your mother's command and hid. You were too frightened to leave your hiding place. There is nothing to be ashamed of in any of that, on-

ly in the mind of a child, distracted with grief, who expected too much of himself. In the morning, as a frightened, horribly bereaved child, alone, what could you have done but leave them? Nothing. And as for wandering, torturing yourself all these years?" There was silence as she thought for a moment. When she spoke again, her voice was soft and gentle. "I believe that this was necessary to show you the true meaning of redemption when at last you found it, here, in the love of Alice and your family, the respect of your neighbors, and the admiration of Gyrth and myself. The trouble is, Stephen of Wakering, the only one who hasn't realized that you've found it, is you."

There was a long silence, broken only by the crackling of the fire. Time itself seemed to stand still. When, at last, the first rays of the sun began to penetrate the chinks around the door curtain, Alice got up to see to the bread, and the spell was broken. In that dawn moment, a bond was created between the households of Stephen and Eadgyth that was forged of something stronger than blood or kinship and would last for the rest of their lives.

It was much later, when they had all slept, that Eadgyth questioned them about Edward's body and what they had found.

"So someone wants us to think it was the Danes, do they?" she mused, fingering the white scrap from Edward's hand that Stephen had given to her. "It must've been someone who was at the church on Easter morning then, someone who heard

Edward say that the flayed skin was from a Dane he'd caught stealing his sheep, someone who suddenly saw an opportunity to kill Edward and blame the Danes. And unless it was the result of a sudden brain fever, it also suggests that someone had wanted to get rid of Edward for some time and was waiting for the right moment. The Danes are very convenient scapegoats, too. No one's going to go seeking them out to ask them questions, after all, or try to bring them to justice." She stood and clapped her hands decisively. "Sitting here won't solve things, and speaking of questions, I have a few that I would like to ask. Could you hitch up the cart, please, Gyrth? I think we should visit the bereaved family and pay our respects. But first I'd like to go back to Wakering Church. Oh! and bring some tools with you, would you?"

"Tools, my lady?"

"Yes, please. We need something to pull nails out of a door with."

Despite several attempts during the journey Gyrth couldn't elicit any more information from Eadgyth regarding her suspicions about Edward's death. Even Stephen seemed to be lost in thought, but when they arrived at the church, he jumped straight down from the cart and, taking a large pair of pliers and a sack, went off into the churchyard. Gyrth made to follow him, but Eadgyth waved him back.

"There's no need, Gyrth. He can manage."

"What do you expect to find?" asked Gyrth curiously.

"Well, I'm really just confirming a thought of mine, now that we know Edward's death isn't the work of the Danes," replied Eadgyth evasively, and Gyrth could get no more.

Stephen returned to them a few minutes later.

"Definitely not human," he declared, throwing the sack into the back of the cart. "The back's got bits of wool still clinging to it. It's in there should you want to look, my lady."

"No, thank you. I trust your judgment, and it's just as I thought anyway," declared Eadgyth. "It's probably sheep skin. There's a lot around at this time of year, since mutton is the traditional Easter meal. Edward probably used the skin from one of the sheep that he gave to his bondsmen for Easter."

"What made you think it wasn't human?" demanded Gyrth.

"You'll remember how William said that Edward was all bluff and bluster," replied Eadgyth, "that he wasn't a violent man, that his bark was worse than his bite? It seemed curious then that he had actually gone out and killed a Dane. Bearing that in mind, it was much more likely that Edward had used something else for the church door and just pretended it was the skin of a Dane. After all, the important thing was to impress people, to make them think there was nothing he wouldn't do if pushed far enough. It was meant as a warning, he said. As long as people *thought* that he was desperate enough to kill, that was all that mattered. Unfortunately, in doing so, he also gave his murderer the opportunity he'd been

waiting for. Edward's death could now be conveniently blamed on the Danes, seeking revenge for their comrade's death. The murderer even tried to make it look like a spread-eagle, based on the terrible stories we've all heard, just to be sure the right people got blamed. He had no way of knowing that someone here had seen the results of a spread-eagle first-hand and would realize it wasn't the work of the Danes after all. And now that we know that the skin on the door is not human, we know the Danes had no motive anyway."

"But surely Edward must have realized that, sooner or later, someone would discover the skin wasn't human and that he was only bluffing," said Gyrth. "He'd have been a laughingstock."

"Oh, I'm sure he intended to remove it before anyone investigated too closely but he was killed, and now we know that someone local is hiding a terrible crime. Under the circumstances I would like to pay my respects to his daughter. What a ghastly ordeal for her! Her father dead and a baby expected. I'm sure she would appreciate another woman to talk to at such a time."

Eadgyth's tone sounded sincere, but Gyrth wasn't buying it. Neither, it appeared, was Stephen.

"And while you're doing that," he remarked dryly, "we can be talking to the servants." Eadgyth smiled approvingly, and they set off for Edward's farm.

They were greeted by a household in mourning. In fact, had the Lady Eadgyth not been with them, they wouldn't have been admitted

at all. Anne was pale but calm and invited Eadgyth to sit in her own room by the fire. She pointedly ignored the men, and they wandered into the hall in search of food and gossip. They found both with Eric, Edward's personal bodyservant, who had lost his master, and therefore possibly his living, and was drowning his sorrows. The ale had gone to his head, and he was maudlin and sentimental.

"He was a good master," he said, shaking his head slowly from side to side as he spoke. "People found him strange, but he was always good to me. He used to rant and rave all right, but he never meant anything by it. You got used to it. I've lost count of the times he threatened to throw me out into the cold." He smiled forlornly. "But we both knew he wouldn't. He relied on me too much. He had a good heart. See the way he treated Anne. Most fathers would have thrown her out, but he just shouted a bit and left it at that. He was different with other folk, but he always treated his own people well. And now he's dead at the hands of those murdering butchers. And what shall I do now, with no master?"

Gyrth opened his mouth to say that it wasn't the work of the Danes, but Stephen cut him off, giving him a warning look.

"Didn't he want to know who the father of Anne's baby was?" he asked Eric. "And surely he must have wanted a wedding. Any father would."

"No chance of finding that out," replied Eric. "Not from her." He gestured in the direction of Anne's pri-

vate chamber. "Close as a cockle, that one. You never know what she's thinking. Never gives a thing away. But I think Edward knew who it was, all the same."

"What makes you think that?" asked Gyrth.

"Just a feeling, that's all," said Eric. "For one thing, he didn't try very hard to find out, didn't beat her or anything. I think he already knew. Doesn't matter now anyway."

"Why was Edward in the brickfield last night?" asked Gyrth. "Do you know? It seems a strange place to be after dark."

"I don't know for sure except that he said he was 'going to sort things out' and went off straight after supper. I assumed it was to do with the water rights up at Hadleigh. His trick with the sheepskin certainly worked!"

"What?" Gyrth and Stephen spoke simultaneously, staring at him aghast.

Eric grinned drunkenly. "Well, you didn't think it was a real Dane, did you? The master wouldn't have hurt anyone, I told you. All wind, he was. No, he used the skin of the animal he gave us for the Easter feast. You see, he didn't want to risk losing the water rights case in court, like the last time. So he decided to try to frighten Matthew of Barling with the skin on the church door instead. And it must have worked because I saw Matthew in the brickfield over by the drying sheds, waiting for him yesterday evening."

"You're sure it was Matthew?" asked Stephen.

"Of course I'm sure," replied Eric crossly. "You can't mistake that

hair anywhere. You can see it even in the dark. But we'll never know what they agreed now because the Danes killed Master Edward, didn't they? They took revenge on him for something he never did. And Matthew will keep the grazing and the water rights and everything," and he fell, sobbing, off the bench and onto the floor rushes, where he promptly fell asleep.

Although he was bursting with the information that they'd got from Eric, Gyrth found the journey home a silent one. In response to his question about how Anne was bearing up, he received only the rather curt reply that she was calm. Eadgyth had fallen deep into thought and wouldn't be disturbed.

At home she sat for a long time staring into the fire, rousing herself only to eat. Hospitality and etiquette demanded that no one else could go to sleep until she was settled for the night, in a private corner of the long house that, in deference to her rank, Stephen had divided off with screens made of withies from the marshes. When at last Gyrth gently mentioned this to her, she was full of apologies and ordered them all to bed, but still stayed, motionless, by the fire.

In the morning, however, she was brisk and fresh. "What did you two discover from the servants?" she asked whilst they broke their fast. Gyrth related the conversation with Eric and was rather disappointed at her reaction. Eadgyth didn't seem surprised that Eric knew the skin on the church door wasn't human. She only shook her head sadly as if

he were just confirming something that she already knew.

"So, Gyrth, Stephen, what do you make of it all?" she asked finally. "Who do you think is responsible for this terrible, wicked act? Gyrth?"

"Well, my lady, it's fairly obvious that Matthew of Barling's to blame, although I have a feeling that you're going to tell me he isn't."

"Oh? And what makes you think that?"

"Well, if it were that simple, you wouldn't have spent half the night staring into the fire, lost in thought!" replied Gyrth stoutly.

Eadgyth laughed. "Quite right! But sometimes life *is* that simple after all. Perhaps my mind is too devious, and I'm not seeing what's right under my nose. Tell me, why do you think it was Matthew?"

Gyrth took a deep breath. He hoped he was wrong. He'd quite liked Matthew when he'd seen him on Easter Day.

"Well, first of all, there's motive," he began. Eadgyth nodded approvingly. "Matthew had reason to kill Edward because of the quarrel over the water rights at Hadleigh. The skin on the church door, the skin of a Dane as far as Matthew knew, must have really scared him and made him realize what a dangerous opponent Edward was, which was precisely what Edward wanted him to think. But instead of backing down, Matthew decided to deal with Edward once and for all. The skin on the door gave him the idea of killing Edward and blaming it on the Danes. He arranged to meet him in the brickfield that night, where Eric saw him, and he

killed him. He tried to make it look like a spread-eagle, just to be sure, but couldn't go through with it and bolted."

"Hmm. There are several bits missing to that story, though," said Eadgyth almost to herself. "For instance, how did he get a message to Edward about the meeting? Eric would surely have known if there had been a message for his master. He didn't mention it at all?"

"No," replied Stephen. "In fact, he said he didn't know why Edward went out that evening, except that he 'was going to sort things out,' those were his words. Eric guessed it was to do with the water rights because he saw Matthew in the field waiting for him."

"And why did Matthew suddenly take fright and decide to kill Edward? After all, the law is completely on Matthew's side over the water rights. He'd beaten Edward once in court, over the grazing. He had no reason to think he wouldn't do so again." She paused for a moment, thinking. "But something certainly needs to be done. Perhaps it just needs a little encouragement. I think you may be right after all, Gyrth. Perhaps it *was* Matthew. Stephen, send someone for the shire reeve, will you? I think an arrest should be made."

Stephen regarded her accusingly. "You don't think it was Matthew at all. What are you up to? My lady," he added belatedly.

"In the story of Our Lord's ministry on earth," replied Eadgyth, "is a story of a lost sheep. Very appropriate under the circumstances, don't you think? I feel that I should

give this particular lost sheep every opportunity to return to the fold. I very much hope that I'm wrong because what I'm thinking is almost too wicked to contemplate, may God forgive me. Go for the reeve, please, before I change my mind. And tell him that I would appreciate a word with him after the arrest."

Matthew of Barling was arrested later that evening. Surprisingly, according to the gossip, he remained calm and made no objection apart from saying that he wasn't responsible for Edward's death. The determination of his guilt or innocence was now left to God. Matthew would have to undergo the ordeal by fire: he'd have to carry a red-hot iron for nine paces; then his wounds would be bandaged and left for seven days. After that time, if the wounds were healing cleanly, he was innocent. If they had infected, he was guilty and would be hanged.

The following day was the day of Edward's funeral. The whole village attended, including, amazingly, Matthew, securely bound and supervised by Alfred, the reeve. Gyrth marveled again at the influence that Eadgyth's name and title could have even here, so far from home.

There was a rustle of disapproval and murmurs of "Shame!" when Matthew entered the church, but these were immediately silenced by a glare from Alfred. Matthew's family, including Rolf, seemed to be in shock, and Rolf made no move to approach his father.

Edward's household, led by Anne, walked behind the coffin. She was

heavily veiled and made no sound. Her appearance in public, in her condition, was obviously startling to many people, but the comments were made quietly. Anne had the reputation of someone who always had her own way, and now there was no one to gainsay her accompanying her father on his last journey. Several of Edward's servants were weeping, including Eric, who appeared not to have been sober since his master's death.

Just before the coffin was lowered into the ground, someone at the back of the crowd who then refused to identify himself suggested that the body should be uncovered to see whether it bled, as it was well known that it would do so in the presence of the murderer. Father Aidan turned pale and desperately looked at Eadgyth for support. She declared that, in view of the nature of Edward's injuries such a procedure would be both a waste of time and extremely cruel to Anne in her present delicate condition. Edward's interment was then completed as rapidly as decency allowed in case anyone else decided to pursue this dreadful course of action.

Alfred the reeve then stepped forward and announced that the ordeal by fire would take place on the following day in the field behind the churchyard. All were ordered to attend, as was customary, so that the king's justice could be witnessed. Everybody paid their respects to Anne, a process that she endured calmly, and gradually the churchyard emptied. No one made any attempt to speak to Matthew, although Alfred kept him there until

everyone had gone. Then, after a nod from Eadgyth, Matthew was taken back to the tithe barn, where he was in temporary custody.

Eadgyth spent that night pacing up and down, her face calm but her hands betraying her agitation. She didn't rest until it was almost daylight. But just after dawn when they all set off for Waking, she was once again composed and in control.

By the time they arrived, a crowd had already gathered. The men of Matthew's family stood by in silent support, not knowing what else to do. The women were fussing with clean dressings and goose fat. The blacksmith had lit the brazier filled with charcoal during the night, and the iron bar was already glowing red. At a nod from Eadgyth, Alfred announced the nature of the ordeal and that Matthew was accused of the murder of Edward of Waking.

"How do you say, Matthew of Barling? Are you guilty or not guilty of the crime of which you are accused?"

"Not guilty!"

"Are you prepared to undergo the ordeal?"

"I am."

White-faced, Matthew approached the brazier. The blacksmith lifted the glowing red iron from the fire with a huge pair of tongs and held it out to him. Matthew extended his arms, and the iron was lowered, nearer and nearer to his outstretched palms. When it almost touched his hands, there was a moment when the world seemed to stand still, and then—

"Stop!"

The command was quiet but pen-

etrated to every part of the field. The voice was that of someone used to having authority and to being obeyed without question. Eadgyth. The blacksmith immediately lifted the iron away, back into the brazier, and Matthew sat down on the grass rather suddenly as his legs betrayed him.

Alfred the reeve stepped forward, looking inquiringly at Eadgyth. He had obviously been expecting something of the sort.

"My lady?"

"Master Reeve. Thank you for your assistance and your trust."

The reeve inclined his head respectfully. She continued.

"Unfortunately, the lost sheep of whom I spoke yesterday has not returned to the fold. I had hoped that he would speak out, now at the last moment, and confess, if only to spare his father the pain and humiliation of the ordeal, but I was wrong. He has had his chance at redemption." A murmur grew in the crowd as people realized the significance of what she was saying.

"I am therefore forced to expose him before the whole village. Please release Matthew of Barling. He is guilty of nothing more than trying to protect a worthless son." Her voice rose imperiously. "Please arrest Rolf, Matthew's son, for the wilful murder of Edward of Wakering."

There was a short-lived disturbance as Rolf tried to make a run for it, but the blacksmith blocked his way and cuffed his ear, and he went down as if poleaxed. When he regained consciousness, he was bound hand and foot against a tree, his accuser calmly facing him. Eadgyth

sat in a chair brought out from Father Aidan's cottage, Gyrth and Stephen on either side of her. Alfred stood next to his prisoner, and the villagers all sat around attentively.

Given Rolf's reputation, this was an outcome much more in keeping with their expectations, and they were anxious to hear how the Lady Eadgyth had known Rolf was guilty of Edward's murder. There was a huge novelty in being addressed by a noble lady, and the story promised to be a good one.

"This is a bad business," began Eadgyth. "For a long time I thought it was about land, grazing and water rights, because that's what we were meant to think. But it's actually about a baby." There was a sigh of recognition as her audience began to understand.

"As you will know, Anne of Wakering, Edward's daughter, is expecting a baby. No one knows who the father is, but Edward guessed."

"How?" interrupted Gyrth, and then apologized.

"No, no, Gyrth, perhaps it would be easier for everyone if you asked me questions as we go along; then I'll be sure I've left nothing out.

"Edward guessed that Rolf was the father of his expected grandchild simply because Anne was kept under such close surveillance at all times. She could have become pregnant only by someone close at hand who wouldn't attract attention if he were seen in the vicinity. It had to be someone of roughly her own age who lived nearby. Rolf is the only man answering that description."

"He also has a reputation for such things," remarked Stephen dryly.

"As you say," replied Eadgyth.

The crowd was settling in nicely now. This was a story they could relate to.

"Anyway, Edward guessed about Rolf. He decided to try to frighten the young man into owning up, with a warning as to the consequences of shirking his responsibilities. His solution was drastic and malevolent. He took a sheepskin, fresh from the Easter slaughter, and nailed a piece of it to the church door last Sunday."

She paused as Rolf stared at her incredulously. There was no doubt that he hadn't realized the skin wasn't genuine. Eadgyth noted this sadly and continued.

"He pretended it was the skin of a Dane whom he'd caught stealing his sheep. The implication was that there would be dire consequences if Rolf didn't confess. Unfortunately, his warning proved to be *too* effective, but we'll come to that in a moment."

"Why didn't he put the skin on Matthew's own door?" asked Stephen.

"I think that was for two reasons," said Eadgyth. "First, he probably wasn't absolutely certain that he was right. Since he already had a quarrel with Matthew, if he were wrong about Rolf, his action could be easily explained away as trying to frighten Matthew over the water rights instead. Edward was counting on Rolf's guilty conscience to understand that the warning was really meant for him. Second, making the warning public would tell Rolf

that Edward was also prepared to make the affair public if necessary.

"Unfortunately, Edward's action had a completely unforeseen consequence, didn't it, Rolf?" She looked at him quizzically. "Perhaps you'll tell us, or are you denying your guilt?"

Rolf looked back at her steadily. He had regained some of his composure although his eyes held a very curious, almost pleading expression that Gyrth couldn't fathom. It was almost as if Rolf and Eadgyth shared a secret. The bond between the accuser and the accused, he supposed.

"No, my lady," Rolf finally replied. "I'm not denying it. And you're right. When I saw the skin on the door, I realized straight away that Edward knew about Anne and me. I was afraid that he was going to accuse me then and there in front of everyone. He was really enjoying himself, tormenting me and baiting my father. That's why I tried to drag Father away before there was a fight."

"We all remember your doing that," said Eadgyth gently. There was a sudden indefinable change in her attitude. Gyrth was reminded of the time she had come across one of the manor urchins being beaten for stealing apples. When she had questioned him, the child had said, quite simply, that he was hungry. The beating had ceased, and the child went home with apples, bread, mutton and vegetables.

Eadgyth continued. "Gyrth said at the time that he thought it was strange that you pulled your father away from the confrontation. Your father didn't understand the signif-

icance of what was going on. 'Since when did you run away from a fight? Whose side are you on?' he said, or words to that effect. But your actions told Edward that you'd understood the warning was actually for you. 'Listen to your son,' he said to Matthew. 'He knows what it's all about.' At the time I thought that was a very odd thing for him to say. It's what made me suspect you in the first place."

Rolf nodded ruefully.

"But even you didn't really understand Edward's warning properly, did you?" continued Eadgyth. "Edward's warning was to make you own up about being Anne's lover. But you thought he was physically threatening you, didn't you?"

"You tell me now that there was no Dane," said Rolf. "But I thought it was true. I thought he was warning me that I was next. I thought he was going to skin me alive."

Eadgyth nodded in satisfaction. "Exactly. So, thinking that your life was in danger from Edward of Waking, you decided on a terrible solution. In fact, it was probably Edward himself, by using the skin of a Dane, who gave you the idea. In mitigation I have to say that Edward's action that day was malicious and malevolent. In many respects he was hoist with his own petard. Nailing a piece of skin to the church door to intimidate and threaten people is the action of a sick mind, and he paid a terrible price. You sent him a message saying that you wanted to talk to him about the baby, and you met him in the brickfield that night."

"How did he send the message?"

asked Gyrth. "You said Eric would have known if there had been any messages."

"Eric would probably have known about verbal messages," Eadgyth replied. "But he wouldn't necessarily have known about a written message, left somewhere obvious for Edward to find. Do you remember the small, thin, white scrap that you found in Edward's hand when you were wrapping his body? It was reused parchment. Well, apart from royal and noble houses, where else is parchment found?"

"Of course!" Stephen clapped a hand to his head as he understood. "In monasteries! And Rolf spent a year in the monastery at Barking."

"Exactly," agreed Eadgyth. "And that also means that he can read and write. That narrowed down the people who could have sent Edward a written message. You had small scraps of parchment left over from your time in the monastery, didn't you, Rolf?"

Rolf nodded. He suddenly grew animated. "I enjoyed working in the scriptorium. I showed promise, they said," his eyes lighting up wistfully. "The parchment was rubbed down and used several times for practicing our letters, and when it got very thin, the monks let us keep it for our own use. I had no use for mine, no one in my family can read, so I kept it."

Eadgyth regarded him thoughtfully and then continued.

"So, having received your message, Edward went out after supper to meet you. Eric actually saw you waiting by the drying sheds but thought it was your father. He for-

got there was someone else in the family with white hair. There was an argument between you and Edward, and you hit him. Then you tried to make it look like the work of the Danes by starting a spread-eagle on the body."

There was a collective growl from the crowd. Eadgyth raised her hand, and Alfred stepped forward warningly. The growl subsided. Rolf hung his head and stared at his feet.

"And you would probably have got away with it," continued Eadgyth, looking questioningly at Stephen, who suddenly turned slightly pale. It was his evidence that had originally told Eadgyth that the spread-eagle wasn't Danish work. Now she would have to tell everyone. "But I already knew that the skin on the church door wasn't human," she concluded, smiling gently. "If the skin weren't Danish, then Edward couldn't have been killed by other Danes seeking revenge for their comrade's death. Therefore it had to be someone local."

Standing next to him, Gyrth felt a wave of relief sweeping over Stephen. His secret was safe. Gyrth suddenly realized that he'd been holding his breath. As he gently exhaled, he glanced at his friend, but Stephen seemed to have something wrong with the lacing on his boot and was bending over so that no one could see his face.

"What I want to know is this," demanded Eadgyth, suddenly standing and towering over Rolf. "I can understand your trying to put the blame on the Danes. After all, none of them was ever likely to be brought to justice. But why didn't you speak

out when your father was accused? Would you really have let him undergo the ordeal, perhaps even be hanged? Are you really that unfeeling? I gave you every chance, but you kept silent. Surely one murder is bad enough without letting your father go to the gallows in your place? Are you such a coward?"

But Rolf wouldn't be drawn any further. He sat like a statue, head bent, silent tears staining the front of his jerkin, and despite Alfred's shouting and the growing resentment of the crowd, wouldn't say another word. Eventually he was taken away. With no chance of his paying the hundred and twenty-five pounds of silver, the *wergild* for Edward's life that the law demanded, he would hang.

The journey home was another one taken in complete silence, and Gyrth knew instinctively that Eadgyth hadn't finished yet.

She'd gone into the church alone after the villagers had dispersed at Alfred's command and remained there for some time. When she came out, she seemed to have come to a decision. She had short whispered conversations with both Alfred and Matthew, and then she, Gyrth, and Stephen all set out for Southchurch.

As soon as they arrived, she announced that she would like to rest for the remainder of the afternoon and then go to Wakering again, straight after supper. Alice objected. It would be dark, and the roads were dangerous, even over such a short distance. There were still, after all, renegade Danes in the area. But Eadgyth said that Stephen and

Gyrth would be with her and she had business to conduct that couldn't wait until morning.

"I can't manage another sleepless night," she said with a rueful smile. "I've started this, and I have to finish it although I think I may have taken too much on myself. No one should be above the law."

Gyrth found this a curious statement coming from a lady of Eadgyth's status. After all, she had the power of life and death over her bondsmen, should she choose to exercise it. In many respects, she *was* the law on her own manor. Why should she be so concerned about Rolf, a self-confessed murderer? He asked Stephen what he thought. Stephen shook his head.

"She's up to something, that's for sure. There's more to all this than meets the eye, but I trust her. She could have betrayed my secret this morning, but she didn't."

"Of course she didn't," said Gyrth, shocked at the suggestion, but then remembered that he knew Eadgyth much better than Stephen did. "I've been her servant for years," he continued, "and I've never seen her like this before. Mind you, she's never solved a murder before. Well, not at first hand, if you take my meaning. But yes, of course I trust her."

"So all we can do is her bidding. No doubt she'll tell us all in good time."

"As some of you will have guessed," began Eadgyth when they were all settled in Anne's private chamber, "this sad business isn't quite over yet."

She was sitting on a stool by the fire, having insisted that Anne keep the only chair in deference to her condition. She appeared not to have noticed that the chair hadn't been offered in the first place. Although she was now physically lower than anyone else in the room she gave the impression of quiet, commanding authority. Anne had been reluctant to see the group of visitors who had appeared on her doorstep earlier that evening, but Eadgyth's authority, backed up by Alfred the reeve, had overridden her objections.

Eadgyth was accompanied by Gyrth, Stephen, and Matthew, who all now stood round the sides of the small room, arms folded.

"This is a story of unparalleled evil," continued Eadgyth, "so much so that for a while I failed to comprehend the truth. I couldn't imagine how anyone could be so manipulative and self-interested. But you had an excellent teacher, didn't you, Anne?"

So, thought Gyrth, now we're getting to the truth at last.

"I don't know what you mean," replied Anne calmly, smoothing the front of her robe to emphasize her slightly swelling stomach. "Surely you can't be suggesting that I had anything to do with this? I understand that Rolf confessed to my father's murder this morning. Eric told me. Apparently he also said that he is the father of my child. That, of course, is ridiculous."

Eadgyth drew in her breath sharply.

"So you would even deny him that, would you, in your selfishness,

pride, and arrogance?" she said slowly. "Thank you for that."

"Thank you?" responded Anne, slightly shaken.

"Yes, thank you. Your refusal to acknowledge Rolf and your complete lack of remorse confirm my course of action in coming here tonight. It makes what I have decided must be done much easier to bear." She settled herself and began.

"When I spoke to the village this morning, I said that this affair wasn't anything to do with land but with a baby. I was wrong. It is everything to do with land, land and greed. You, Anne, hated your father, didn't you? Why, I can only guess, since you've been pampered and spoilt ever since you were born. You've been given opportunities far beyond those you could normally have expected in life by a doting father who couldn't see that he was breeding a monster. But you wanted more, didn't you? You wanted the farm."

She looked at Anne speculatively, but there was no reaction.

"Right from the time of the murder, once I knew that the skin on the church door wasn't that of a renegade Dane, I realized that Edward's murder had been committed by someone who had been planning his death for a very long time. That someone had a longstanding hatred of Edward and had been waiting for a suitable opportunity. That description didn't really fit Rolf of Barling."

Anne smiled smugly.

"Now you're just guessing, my lady." There was a slight but unmistakable sneer in the word "lady."

Eadgyth ignored the insult.

"Perhaps. We'll see. Although you had been planning this for a long time, you obviously weren't going to carry out the actual deed yourself and you had no suitable accomplice until quite recently. You needed a scapegoat, a whipping boy. And you found the perfect candidate. Rolf came back from the monastery already possessed of a bad reputation and was ideal for your purpose. It probably started with secret notes between you. This was quite safe. After all, you two are the only ones who can read and write. Then you must have met in quiet corners, giving your women servants the slip. Flattered and overwhelmed by your attentions, he was easily manipulated into doing anything you said. You probably didn't intend to become pregnant, but these things happen. If anything, that made you even more determined to get rid of your father.

"I have no idea what your original plan was, but your father himself suddenly provided you with an excellent opportunity. He put the skin on the church door, and you realized that you could now murder him almost with impunity. Of course you knew that the skin wasn't human, that it was a sheepskin, but you didn't tell Rolf that, did you? You let him think your father had become murderous, had actually killed a Dane, and intended to kill him, too. Was it you who gave Rolf the idea of the spread-eagle?"

Anne made no response and continued to regard Eadgyth with cold disdain.

"I saw the look of betrayal in Rolf's eyes this morning when he

discovered that the skin wasn't human and watched him realize that you must have known all along. If Eric and the servants knew, then you must have known. Rolf realized that you'd betrayed and manipulated him, but he said nothing. He remains loyal to you as the mother of his child in spite of what you've done to him. I believe he loves you. He is certainly prepared to go to the gallows for you."

"For me? But he killed my father!" Anne blurted out. "What are you saying? That's he's innocent?"

"No, I'm not saying he's innocent," replied Eadgyth smoothly. "I'm just saying that he's not entirely guilty. You made sure, by the crudest of methods, that Rolf was infatuated with you. You manipulated him into doing your bidding. He was simply your catspaw. He thought his life was threatened. He thought you would marry him. In this belief he killed Edward. But you had no intention of doing anything of the sort. All you were interested in was the farm. With your father dead and the Danes blamed, you would inherit. Then you could abandon Rolf. He was guilty of murder. You could easily blackmail him into obedience and silence."

Anne remained calm, but her features had become set, as if carved into stone. It was obvious that Eadgyth was speaking the truth. She continued.

"There's worse to come. When Matthew was accused, you saw an even better chance of increasing your land and wealth. You blackmailed Rolf into keeping quiet by pointing out that the only way to

exonerate his father would be to confess his own guilt. If he did that, he would lose you and never see his unborn child. In the hope that Matthew would come through the ordeal successfully, Rolf remained silent. But you, you couldn't really lose, could you? If Rolf confessed, you would still get Edward's farm. If Matthew were hanged for his murder, you could marry Rolf and have two farms. What would you have done then, Anne? Manipulate someone else into murdering Rolf?" She paused.

"And the irony is that in all of this you were innocently aided by Matthew."

Matthew started forward, protesting. Eadgyth waved him back.

"Do not fret, my friend, you are guilty of nothing more than unreserved love for your wayward son, and for that no blame attaches to you. But you refused to speak out, in order to protect him, and that played right into Anne's hands. She was depending on everyone's loyalty. Rolf remained loyal to her just as she knew he would. That's why he wouldn't speak this morning. This whole sorry tale is one of love and betrayal. Rolf has been betrayed by his lover but has refused to incriminate her. You, his father, have stayed loyal to him, even at the risk of undergoing the ordeal by fire and possibly hanging. You had guessed, by the same means as Edward, that Rolf was the father of Anne's child. You knew someone with white hair had been seen in the brickfield that night. It wasn't you, so it had to be Rolf. But take heart, it is your love that will re-

deem him in the end." As she spoke these words, she looked straight at Stephen. "Someone who inspires such love must deserve at least the opportunity of redemption." Stephen inclined his head imperceptibly. He had understood.

Eadgyth stood up abruptly.

"In all of this, Anne, you've been successful because others have a sense of loyalty and love for their families. You have used them all. You would have let them all go to the gallows to satisfy your own greed. What have you to say? Do you still deny Rolf was your lover? Do you still deny him although he lies in custody, awaiting the hangman's noose?"

"I deny everything," said Anne. "You can't prove any of this, and no matter what you may think of me, I shall soon be a woman of property. I make no secret of the fact that I hated my father. He was a bully. He kept me confined like a prisoner. He owed me for all those years kept here with no company except ignorant, illiterate peasants. But you can prove nothing, so do your worst!"

"Thank you for making yourself so clear," responded Eadgyth. "At least now we know where we stand. This is what I now propose, with your permission, Alfred." The reeve stepped forward. "I propose that as there are extenuating circumstances for Rolf of Barling's guilt, he should not face the death penalty. He was manipulated by a creature evil beyond belief. He remained loyal to her despite knowing that she had betrayed him and would have gone to the gallows for her. I there-

fore suggest that he be taken to Barking and enter the monastery there, to live out the rest of his days in penitential prayer, to atone for his crimes. Perhaps he will be allowed to continue the writing and illumination that he clearly found so fulfilling before," she added.

"But, my lady," objected Alfred, "the only way Rolf can be freed is by the payment of the *wergild*. The price of a man's life is one hundred and twenty-five pounds of silver."

"I appreciate that," replied Eadgyth. "I will pay the *wergild*."

There was a stunned silence. Anne smiled.

"I think I could probably agree with you on that," she said smugly.

"You haven't heard me out," replied Eadgyth tartly. "I doubt if you will agree with me then, Anne of Wakering. Can you think of nothing but money and personal gain even now? We all know that traditionally the *wergild* is paid to the dead man's next-of-kin, but I have no intention of letting you profit from your father's death. I will pay the *wergild*, but not to you. It will be held by Alfred here, on behalf of the king, until your child is born. Some of it will be used for his upbringing."

"I think I will be able to support my own child," replied Anne sarcastically.

"As I said, you haven't heard me out," said Eadgyth. "You won't be able to support your child because you won't be here. As soon as it is born, you will enter a nunnery and stay there. The farm will be run by Edward's bonded servants, the 'ignorant illiterate peasants' of whom

you spoke. They will teach him the sense of honesty and integrity that you cannot. He will be reared by decent Christian folk who will not spoil him or teach him greed and selfishness. I myself will be his god-mother; all the servants will be directly responsible to me. When he is old enough to inherit, he will have the balance of the *wergild* and the farm. This is the only solution available to you, Anne. At least this way you will stay alive and your child will grow up untainted by the evil of your presence. What is your answer?"

"My answer is no! There is nothing you can threaten me with to make me agree! You have no proof. You are just bluffing!" Anne had risen and was gripping the arms of her chair, her knuckles white.

"No proof?" said Eadgyth softly. "Dear, dear, I must have forgotten. Gyrth, you remember this morning we spoke about the message that enticed Edward into the brickfield to his death?"

"Yes, my lady. We knew it wasn't a verbal message because Eric would have known about it. It was written on parchment. You knew it had to be from Rolf because he had been in a monastery and probably had pieces of parchment from that time. He could also read and write."

"Correct. But it goes further than that, doesn't it? I didn't say anything this morning because I saw the pleading look in Rolf's eyes asking me not to betray Anne, and my heart went out to him. It's all very well knowing that Rolf wrote the letter." Eadgyth moved across to stand directly in front of Anne. "But

how was Edward supposed to know what it said when he received it? How did he even know it was for him in the first place? He couldn't read. He could only have known if someone read it to him, and the only person in this house who can read, Anne, is you!"

Anne went white.

"I'll deny it! I'll say that I begged him not to go! You can't prove anything!"

"Ah, but that's not what matters, now that you've just admitted your guilt," continued Eadgyth, relentlessly as Anne clapped her hands to her mouth, realizing what she'd said. "You will pay for your crime, one way or the other. Alfred, correct me if I'm wrong. The suspicion is enough, supported by evidence such as this, for an ordeal by fire."

"If someone were to accuse Anne of Wakering publicly, then yes, she would have to undergo the ordeal," replied Alfred.

"You wouldn't dare!" Anne's voice rose hysterically. "You wouldn't dare accuse me. I'm carrying a child."

"Of course I wouldn't accuse you now," replied Eadgyth steadily. "You need time to consider. A nunnery or the ordeal. But make no mistake. Unless I receive a satisfactory answer by the time your babe is born, I shall accuse you publicly of the murder of your father, and you will face the fire."

"You're bluffing!" Anne screamed. "You wouldn't dare!" But Eadgyth had already turned on her heel and followed by the shocked, silent men had left the room.

Outside, by the cart, Matthew

caught Eadgyth's arm. "My lady! Please! One final favor, although God knows we already owe you so much."

Eadgyth smiled at him gently.

"It is already done, Matthew. Rolf is on his way to Barking as we speak. And no, he will never know that Anne didn't love him and never intended to marry him. His life will be hard enough as it is. We will leave him that at least."

They returned to Maldon soon afterwards. Spring turned into summer, and the time approached for Eadgyth to travel south once again, this time to attend the consecration of Cnut's new church at Ashingdon.

By a mutual unspoken agreement, the affair at Easter wasn't mentioned. She and Gyrth had spoken about it only once, when Gyrth had asked her what she thought Anne's decision would be.

"I don't know, Gyrth, I really don't. I think about nothing else. Was I right? Was it up to me? Perhaps I'm putting myself in a position where only God should be."

"If you hadn't acted, then Matthew or Rolf or both would have died a felon's death," replied Gyrth stoutly. "This way, you *have* left it up to God, surely. If Anne goes into a nunnery, she's admitting her guilt. If she chooses the ordeal, God will de-

cide her guilt or innocence by the wounds on her hands."

Eadgyth held his arm for a moment. "Thank you for that, Gyrth. You really are a good friend to me," and to Gyrth's embarrassment, her eyes filled with tears.

"Will you really accuse her publicly if you have to?" he asked curiously.

"Oh yes," replied Eadgyth quite firmly. "I shall. But I hope it won't come to that. This is my daily prayer to the good Lord."

"Then, my lady, if you don't mind, I'll put in a word with the old gods, just to make sure," said Gyrth, and was greatly cheered when Eadgyth smiled spontaneously for the first time in weeks.

It was on a hot autumn day at the beginning of August, just as they were setting out for Ashingdon, that word came from Waking. Stephen, busy with the finishing touches at the new church had been unable to come himself but had sent William to bring them the news.

Anne of Waking was dead in childbirth. The child, a girl, had survived. She had immediately been baptized Eadgyth.

"The Lord is merciful," was all Lady Eadgyth would say, but whether she meant to herself or to Anne of Waking, Gyrth never knew.

All the Right Trappings

William T. Sampson

Dorothy Druthers would be pretty close to eighty years old, Joe Slattery guessed. Barely five feet tall, with silver-gray hair done in a bun above a pair of soft-blue eyes. Somebody's greatgrandmother, probably. She'd just handed over four thousand dollars of her life savings to one of the most notorious con artists in the country (if you didn't count the ones who work both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue), but she absolutely refused to admit she'd been taken.

"There must be some mistake," she told Slattery for the fourth time that afternoon. "Mr. Putney seems like such a nice man, I just can't believe he would do anything wrong."

"Ma'am, his name is not Putney. That's just one of his many aliases."

"Aliases?"

"Phony names. As I said before, his real name is Vincent Puccini."

Druthers gave him a condescending look. "He told me not to tell anyone," she said, glancing furtively around, "but since you're a policeman, I suppose it's all right. You see, Mr. Putney is a bank examiner, and he's trying to capture a dishonest teller."

Slattery shook his head. "We've been over all that. Look, the man's nothing but a crook. Wanted by the police in a dozen states, including this one."

"It couldn't be the same person!"

"I'm afraid it is, Mrs. Druthers."

"Please call me Dorothy."

"All right, Dorothy. I'm sorry you had this experience, but—"

"He called me Dorothy, too."

"Who is that, ma'am?"

"Why, Mr. Putney, of course."

"Puccini," Slattery said, telling himself he was going to have to stop gritting his teeth like this. "P-U-C-C-I-N-I. Vincent Puccini. Sometimes known as Vinny the Pooh." He pointed again to the mug shot book that lay open on his desk.

"Vinny the who?"

"The Pooh. It's a takeoff on a well-known oh, never mind."

"And what are all those lines doing behind him?"

Slattery suppressed a sigh. "They give an indication of his height."

"Oh yes, of course," she beamed.

"And he is such a fine, *tall* man, don't you think, Mr. Slattery?"

"I think it's hilarious," Tom England said, and burst into another fit of laughter.

"Well, I don't," Slattery growled. "And neither did Belcher. He wants to know when we're going to take this guy off the street."

"Why do lieutenants always make things sound so simple? The Pooh materializes just long enough to rip somebody off, then goes back into the woodwork."

"I know. You'd think a guy that

tall, with that big a nose and so many wants and warrants would be easy to track down. I've seen him exactly once, and then he slipped through my fingers."

"As I recall, a little bank robbery came between the two of you that time," England said. "Not to mention your wedding day."

"You know what, partner? You just gave me an idea."

"Oh?"

"Henrietta Nicely. Remember her?"

"How could I forget? The Southern Belle with the big voice and the heavy handbag that conked one of the bank robbers on the head. From south Georgia, right?"

Slattery grinned. "Little town called Honest. Listen, Tom, the Pooh thought he'd talked her out of some big money, but she was onto him right from the start. I just wonder if she remembers anything he said that would be of help to us."

"You gonna call her?"

"I don't see how it could hurt, do you?"

England grinned at him. "You know how impetuous that old girl is. She's liable to fly up here."

"Aw, she wouldn't do that."

"Tell you what, Slattery," Henrietta Nicely said, "I'll just fly on up there tomorrow or the next day, and we'll see if we can nab that joker."

Slattery winced, not so much because her voice was even louder than he remembered, but because he hadn't listened to England. "Wait a minute now, Henrietta—"

"Hank."

"—Hank. Just tell me if you re-

call the Pooh mentioning a place he stays, the kind of car he drives, anything like that."

"I don't know what he drives or where he hangs out, except around the banks trying to rip off honest people. Look, my brother Norville and I are fixing to come up there anyway to see our sister Nellie May, so what I could do is go undercover—"

"I can't let you do that," Slattery said hastily. "Besides, we already have a couple of lady cops who—"

"—and maybe we can flush him out."

"No, thanks, Hank. Listen, you take care now, and I'll be seeing you, okay?"

"Right on," Nicely said. "I'll call you when I get in."

Slattery heard the click and the dial tone, stared at the receiver for a moment, then gently cradled it and put a hand to his forehead.

"Well?" England said.

"Well, what?"

"Is she flying up here?"

"You make it sound like she has her own airplane, for Pete's sake! No, she's not flying up here." Slattery ran a hand through his hair. "I talked her out of it."

"You sure about that?"

"Of course I'm sure."

Henrietta Nicely nursed the nose of the burgundy Beechcraft up ever so slightly and gave a chuckle of satisfaction as the wheels gently kissed the south runway of Greater Municipal Airport. Moments later she parked in front of the large aluminum-roofed hangar

that housed Chuck's Flying Service and turned to the bearded man in the seat beside her. "Well, Norville, I got us here in one piece. How'd you like that cream puff landing?"

Norville Nicely looked fondly at his sixty-two-year-old baby sister. "Shoot, it's jest like I been tellin' you: keep the nose up through yer main-wheel tetch-down and the airplane will purt-near land itself." He watched approvingly as she closed the fuel mixture control and waited for the prop to stop before she switched the key off.

While Norville walked to the main terminal building to rent a car, Henrietta Nicely stowed some of their baggage in one of Chuck's coin-operated storage lockers, then placed a call to Slattery, only to learn he was out. Oh well, she thought, tomorrow's another day.

And so it was.

Tom England shuffled through the pile of papers on his desk. "Another day, another dollar," he said.

"And maybe a long-awaited collar." Slattery sipped contentedly from a steaming mug as he picked up a memo from his own desk.

"Yep, this just might be the Pooh's unlucky day."

Slattery almost choked on his coffee.

"Don't bet on it," he said.

"What's wrong?"

"Note here says a lady named Hank called from Chuck's Flying Service yesterday. Said she'd get back to me today."

"Chuck's Flying Service, huh?"

"Yeah."

England grinned. "Almost

makes it sound like she has her own airplane, doesn't it?"

"C'mon," Slattery muttered. "Let's go put out our decoys."

"Have a seat, ma'am," the young uniformed officer said. "I'll find out where Detective Slattery is."

Henrietta Nicely smiled her thanks and walked to a black plastic-covered armchair across from the room's only other occupant, a small silver-haired woman in a sky-blue dress. As Nicely settled herself in the chair, which was a great deal more comfortable than it looked, the older woman set aside a crumpled copy of *Reader's Digest* and said, "I'm Dorothy Druthers, and I'm here to see Mr. Slattery, too. About Mr. Putney," she added, a note of regretful resignation in her voice. "Although Mr. Slattery insists on calling him Puccini."

At mention of that name, Nicely's eyebrows not only went up but appeared to perform an abbreviated boogie on her forehead.

"That wouldn't by any chance be Vincent Puccini, would it—tall turkey with curly black hair and the world's most noticeable nose?"

"Well, that's the name Mr. Slattery uses. But Mr. Putney is a bank examiner, for heaven's sake! Asked me to help him catch a dishonest teller." She sighed deeply. "But somehow the four thousand dollars I gave him disappeared."

Nicely leaned forward.

"I'm Henrietta Nicely," she said, "but my friends call me Hank. I think we'd better talk about this."

"And you can call me Dotty," Druthers giggled; then her eyes

widened. "Do you know Mr. Putney, Hank?"

"No, but I am right familiar with Vinny the Pooh Puccini."

Druthers giggled again. "The only Puccini I know is the one who used to sing over the radio on Saturday afternoons."

Nicely smiled to herself. If the Puccini *she* was talking about ever started singing, he'd probably face so many counts of fraud they'd have to build a separate courthouse to handle them all.

Druthers, she decided, must have really been sold on the Pooh's line of garbage. She explained in some detail how he'd tried to work one of his con games on her the previous year.

"That scoundrel," she said, "is so crooked he could hide behind a corkscrew." She gave Druthers a thoughtful look. "We're wasting our time sitting here. How'd you like to help me drop a noose over that alligator's jaws? After all, he tried to take you to the cleaners, too."

"Well, I don't know . . ."

"Do you drive a car?"

"Yes, it's parked outside."

Nicely's eyes lit up. "Good! We'll have to disguise ourselves, of course. I've already put together a little-old-lady outfit. Could you maybe dress up like a little old man?"

"I suppose I could wear some of my husband's clothes," Druthers said. "God rest his soul."

"Excellent!" Nicely boomed. "I'm gonna wear a gray wig with gold-rimmed glasses, and I might even carry a cane. Maybe we can rig up a little mustache and some horn-rims for you. Those special touches are what count. If you add all the

right trappings to your disguise, you can fool just about anybody." She grinned happily. "Here's Plan A: we con the Pooh into meeting us at the Greyhound station, where there's a whole lot of money stashed. Only there isn't really any money there at all. Then we call Slattery and have *him* show up instead. If Slattery can't make it or if things start to get hairy, we just hand over the locker key. While the Pooh's going for the money that isn't there, we split. That's Plan B, okay?"

Druthers merely blinked.

"Now," Nicely continued, "I'm going to the bus station to stash the imaginary money, along with a little surprise for that two-legged rat."

"We can use my car," Druthers said.

"Good thinking, Dotty. We'll stop by your place to get into our outfits, and you can drive me around to some of the banks. Maybe I'll coax that cottonmouth right out from under his log."

That afternoon a bespectacled whitehaired woman who walked with the help of a "snakestick" cane was seen making her way in and out of several of the larger downtown banks. Although she moved in a slow, bent-over fashion, a truly astute observer might have detected a hint of hidden energy in her mien; might even have suspected that, given the right circumstances, and a slightly different uniform, she could just as easily use that same sturdy stick to hit an outside fast ball over the right field fence.

One such astute observer was Joe Slattery. He and Tom England were

backing up a pair of policewomen who also were disguised as little old ladies making their weary way in and out of some of the city's major financial institutions.

"Do you see what I see?" Slattery's suspicion was quickly confirmed by his partner's guffaw.

"Sorry, I couldn't help that," England said. "Think we'd better get her off the street?"

Slattery considered that for a long moment. "No," he said. "But dammit, now we'll have to keep an eye on her as well as our own people."

"She makes a pretty convincing mark," England said, still smiling.

"Maybe. But if the Pooh makes her, she's in big trouble."

The youngish blonde in the boat-neck blouse and white flared pants standing on the northeast corner of Jefferson Avenue when Nicely went into State & City Bank just before closing gave herself away by moving to the northwest corner as Nicely came out.

If that's not the Pooh's new assistant, I'm a pumpkin in a tater patch, thought the loquacious lady from South Georgia. Accordingly she spent a full minute pretending to examine her savings passbook, smiled happily, and crossed the street, passing within two feet of the blonde, who said not a word. Nicely kept shuffling along with her cane and was about to admit she'd been wrong when she heard heels clicking behind her. A voice said, "Excuse me, ma'am."

She listened dutifully as the blonde told how her "uncle" had found a suitcase full of money and

was selling it off for only seventy-five cents on the dollar. "Well, I declare," Nicely said, her decibel-driven drawl at an all-time high, "fate truly works in strange ways! I just this minute put fifteen hundred bucks in the bank, and I bought every penny of it for fifty cents on the dollar. Why, that's just half price!" she declared, her face all aglow. Then she lowered her voice to a gusty stage whisper. "I got it from a friend who found over eight thousand dollars in a brown envelope. He figures it's drug money, and he doesn't like the idea of spendin' drug money, so he's willin' to sell it right cheap. Do you know—" she leaned in even closer "—he was carryin' that brown envelope around with him, showin' it to folks? I told him how dangerous that was, so he asked me to put it in a safe place for him, and that's just what I did." Nicely leaned back and smiled proudly.

"My goodness," the blonde said with all the ingenuousness she could muster. "Are you saying your friend might offer that money to just anyone—even my uncle maybe?"

"Well now, I don't see why not," Nicely replied, her own tone awash with generosity. "Shoot, I'm gonna buy some more myself, soon as the Eagle flies again. 'Course, I can't buy it all, and there's probably over six thousand bucks left in there—"

"In the envelope?" There was incredulity but also a note of real interest in the blonde's voice now.

"It's a big envelope. Listen, if you or your uncle would like to check it out, my friend and I can meet you in —" she glanced at her wrist, real-

ized she'd left her watch on Druthers' dressing table, but went on without batting an eye "—say, an hour."

But before she could add "at the Greyhound bus station," Vincent Puccini drove up, double-parked a shiny black almost-but-not-quite-new Lexus, and stepped out to survey his surroundings—which for the moment appeared to be relatively free of fuzz. Just then, Nicely thought, he resembled a somewhat disreputable racehorse. A bit galvanic going into the gate perhaps, but eager for the run, that great nose testing the air for ways his next ill gains might best be gotten. The blonde, who answered to the name Mary Sue, drew the Pooh aside and filled him in on Nicely's counter-offer, a whispered confab that lasted several minutes.

Horns were honking by then, so the Pooh opened the back door of the Lexus, beckoned to Nicely, and said, "Step this way, m'dear, and we'll discuss this matter further." It was such a reasonable request it caught Nicely completely off-guard. As she ducked into the back seat, he climbed in beside her and pressed a wicked-looking knifeblade against her ribs. "Don't move, and don't make a sound," he ordered. Then, as Mary Sue slid behind the wheel and put the Lexus in gear, the Pooh's voice went upscale a notch. "So it's you, is it? The woman who works for the fuzz?"

"Don't you accuse *me* of consorting with the cops," Nicely thundered. "You low-life scum of a scam man!"

"I recognized you the minute I saw you," Puccini shot back.

So much, thought Nicely, for having all the right trappings.

Again, there were astute observers on hand. Dorothy Druthers had seen the whole thing. Her car was second in line behind the Pooh, so she had little choice but to follow. But Norville Nicely, who had been shadowing his sister and her new-found friend all afternoon, unfortunately found himself headed in the wrong direction. By the time he made it around the block, the Lexus, the Pooh, Mary Sue, and the intrepid two were nowhere in sight.

Druthers, seemingly one of those drivers who consider tailgating a good way to stay in touch with one's fellow motorists, managed to stick with the Pooh all the way to his destination, a deserted, two-story house on the northern edge of the city. Then she blew it all by pulling in directly behind him. As a result, she and Nicely were taken at knife-point to an unfurnished upstairs bedroom, where they were forced to sit on the floor.

When they were settled, Nicely whispered in Druthers' ear, "He doesn't recognize you because he thinks you're a man. So don't say or do anything to change his mind, okay?"

"Okay," Druthers said.

But the tête-a-tête didn't go unnoticed. "This creep," the Pooh said, nodding at Druthers. "Is he the friend who found the drug money?"

"No," Nicely said. "Donald is just a neighbor who drove me downtown today. Isn't that so, Donald?"

"Hung?" Druthers muttered.

Whatever he thought of "Donald," or the brown envelope story, the

Pooh seemed convinced that Nicely did in fact have a large sum of money stashed somewhere because for the next few minutes he kept asking her where it was. And Nicely kept telling him to go fly an elephant.

"Okay, we'll just sit here until you're ready to talk."

"Be my guest," Nicely said.

The Pooh's next ploy was to seize her handbag and dump the contents on the floor, a move that did nothing to raise his status in the Nicely notebook, nor to improve his chances of avoiding a punch in the proboscis should the good lady from the land of the freestone peach and the home of the baseball Braves ever get a clean swing at that preposterous protuberance.

While it would have taken an archaeological team to classify the contents of Nicely's huge handbag, the Pooh found what he was looking for in a matter of moments. "Aha!" he said. "A key to an airport locker. And here's another one." He studied it carefully. "Bus station!" he proclaimed with even more glee. "Now then, Ms. Loudmouth, why don't you just make it easy on yourself and your boyfriend by telling us which key unlocks the money?"

Nicely was about to tell him what he could do with both keys, decided she might have some use for them later, and said instead, "That's for me to know and you to find out, buster."

But the Pooh was feeling magnanimous now. "As much as I dislike you," he said, "I won't leave you here to starve. In an hour or so we'll call someone and tell them where

you are." He then opened one of the room's two windows, picked up her beloved handbag, and tossed it into the twilight. "I don't know if you heard that hit the ground or not," he said smoothly. "The point is, it's a long way down, so don't try it." And with that, he and his cohort walked out, locked the door, and left for parts unknown.

Or so they thought.

Dorothy Druthers had the look of a woman about to wring her hands. "Whatever will we do now?" she asked.

"Cheer up," Nicely said. "We're switching to Plan C. But first we have to get out of here." So saying, she reached beneath her girdle, withdrew a two-meter handi-talkie, and went to the window. "I'm a ham radio operator," she explained as she pushed buttons on the small transceiver, "and I'm about to access a local repeater station and enter the 911 code."

Druthers blinked. "Whatever does that mean?"

"It means," Nicely said, "I'm calling the cops."

A moment later she was patched through to a cell phone, and a worried Joe Slattery said, "Where are you?"

"I don't know," Nicely admitted, "but it must be near the main airport because big planes have been flying over. Thanks to the Pooh, Dorothy Druthers and I are locked in an upstairs room in a deserted house."

"Listen, it's starting to get dark. Do the lights work in that room?"

"That's a Roger."

"Good. We'll get a helicopter in

the air. Wait ten minutes, then begin blinking the light on and off every five seconds, okay?"

"Will do." Nicely explained about the locker keys and the bogus money at the bus station. "The Pooh will probably try the airport first, but he won't find a locker with that number at the main terminal because it's over at Chuck's Flying Service."

"Are they open at this hour?"

"I doubt it."

"Okay. Your brother Norville is here at the office. He'll be following one of the patrol cars I'm sending out that way. In the meantime, you guys sit tight."

"And blink the light?"

"That's the ticket," Slattery said.

"Right big stand of weeds in that side yard," Norville said as he handed his sister her pet pocketbook. "Some of 'em come clean up to my waist."

"Oh, Norville, I can't thank you enough," Nicely cooed as she began stuffing things back into place.

"I shore hope there wasn't any poison ivory out there," he went on. "That stuff gives me a fit."

"I know. Look, I'll be ready in a jiffy. Then we can drive to the bus station. Are the cops still searching the house?"

"Far's I know. Look, I steel think we oughtta jest go on back to Nellie May's. After we see Miz Druthers home, that is."

"Dotty," Druthers told him. "Call me Dotty."

"Yes, ma'am, Miz Dotty."

"And I'm coming with you," she declared.

"Okay, but when we get there,

we're gonna let the police handle this Pooh fella," he said firmly.

"Now, Norville," Nicely purred, "you know I'm not gonna interfere with the police. I just want to see if the little goody I left in locker 152 helps them bag that booger."

"What goody is that?"

"You'll see."

The storage lockers at the bus station were situated along the back wall of the main waiting room. Slattery decided the best way to keep an eye on them was to mingle with a small group of passengers who were standing in the boarding area just outside the glass doors. There'd been no sign of the Pooh or his blonde cohort, but England was watching the street and several patrolmen were checking nearby parking garages for the Lexus.

Just when he was starting to wonder if the Pooh had beaten them to the punch, Slattery saw a teenage boy approach the lockers, study the numbers, produce a key and open one of them. He withdrew a large brown envelope, closed the locker, and walked swiftly away. Slattery slipped inside the glass doors. There were probably thirty or forty people scattered among two banks of theater-style seats separated by a wide center aisle. The boy was headed up that aisle but was no longer carrying the envelope. Since the seated people were all facing away from him, Slattery took his time studying them. A little smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as he spied a familiar trio in the front row at the opposite end of the room, near the main entrance doors.

His eyes shifted back to a man with a large nose who was slouched down in the same row of seats as an elderly couple. He seemed to be trying to reach into something with his right hand. The brown envelope? Even as the thought crossed Slattery's mind, he heard a dull smacking noise, followed by a sharp yipping sound and a long, drawn-out "A-R-R-R-R-G-H!" Somewhere in the middle of the "A-R-R-R-R-G-H!" the man with the nose rose quickly to his impressive full height, the big brown envelope indeed clutched in one hand and a heavy duty, seven inch rat trap clamped tightly on the fingers of the other.

"Hold it right there, Puccini!" Slattery shouted. But the Pooh simply stepped over the seat in front of him, edged over to the main aisle, and with blazing speed bolted toward the front of the room. He might have made it all the way to the main doors had it not been for a determined Henrietta Nicely, who turned in her seat and deftly stuck the snakestick cane across his path.

"Nice to see you again, Vinny," she drawled as he sprawled in the aisle at her feet. Then an elated Slattery was there, pulling the Pooh's wrists behind his back and cuffing them. After hauling him to his feet and turning him over to a uniformed officer, Slattery handed the rat trap to Nicely. "This is the sort of entrapment the courts won't mind at all," he said with a smile.

"I thought it was a right nice touch," Nicely agreed.

"But how in the world did you rig it so it wouldn't go off until he put his hand into the envelope?"

"With a bobby pin, a pair of heavy leather gloves, and about an hour of painful practice," she told him.

Slattery laughed. "Your brother tells me you're also a pretty good student pilot."

Nicely put a hand on Norville's arm and smiled happily. "Well, he's a pretty good flight instructor. Flew cargo planes all over the world for nearly thirty years."

"Look," Slattery said, "I know I tried to talk you out of getting involved, but you were once a police dispatcher so you know the rules. Anyway, you did a good job getting the Pooh out in the open, and I want to thank you for that." He turned as England walked up. "Is the woman in custody?"

England nodded. "I ran her name through NCIC. She's been arrested several times and did six months of a one year sentence in Chicago."

"Well," Nicely said, "it was truly my pleasure to help prise these people out of their hidey hole, especially that rapscaillon Puccini. But don't forget Dotty Druthers. She did her part, too."

Druthers gave them all a doleful look. "Maybe so," she said, "but it is rather a shame, isn't it?"

Slattery raised an eyebrow.

"What's a shame, Dorothy?"

"About poor Mr. Putney. I just don't understand how such a fine, upstanding man could get mixed up with a dishonest woman like that."

Remittance Man

Gary Alexander

Bob Neale was early for her flight from JFK. You had to run a security gauntlet at Rome's Fiumicino Airport these days, and to reach the gate he'd shown his passport five times.

The first shuttle bus from the airplane was already unloading. He unrolled his JULIE HOLMES sign and held it to his chest. Off they came, zombies from *The Night of the Living Dead*, even business class who could stretch out. An eight twenty A.M. arrival was bad enough, but it was only seven forty-five.

A thin woman half his age approached. She was pale, bordering on ashen. "Mr. Neale?"

"Bob," he said.

She hesitated, then gave him a card. "Bob" always threw them. You instinctively expected a remittance man to be a Schuyler or a Chip.

"Tailwinds across the Atlantic," she said, yawning. "Excuse me."

Julie Holmes' card was embossed with the logo of the firm that handled his funds. It identified her as a trust officer and a CPA. She touched the sleeve of a young man beside her. "Oh, this is Dan."

Dan nodded. He had glasses and shaggy hair and was playing a Game Boy.

Bob Neale smiled. "A team. Am I that important?"

"Actually, we're combining this into a mini-vacation."

"Good thinking. How mini?"

"Three days."

He looked at her.

"Dan's in the middle of a project."

Neale led them toward the baggage carousels. Julie asked about the men with the guns. "Is something going on?"

Kid soldiers on balconies carrying machine pistols never failed to unnerve him, too. "They haven't forgotten the Red Brigade."

"Who?" Dan said.

Julie made a hasty entrance into a restroom. Dan explained, "She was bigtime airsick. Bummer."

She came out and said she was better. Bob asked if she was sure, and she said she was sure, even though she didn't look any better. Julie retrieved two suitcases, Dan an overnight bag that he said contained mostly a laptop and floppies. Bob Neale did not wish to contemplate Dan's going four days in the same clothes. He loaded their luggage into the trunk of his car, feeling like a combination valet and tour guide. Anything to postpone the inevitable. He asked if they had a hotel in Rome.

Julie named one right in the core of things. He owned an aged Fiat Uno, an oxidized blue the same color as its exhaust smoke. He drove out of the Fiumicino garage and inserted himself into the manic traffic. Eight years in Italy now and

tailgating and impromptu lane changes were as natural as taking a breath.

He noticed Julie's fingernails digging into her thighs and eased out of the flow. Dan played his Game Boy in the back, oblivious.

"They say you should force yourself to stay awake the first day," Julie said. "To recover from jet lag faster. Our bodies are at, like, midnight last night."

"Good advice. Walk around. See something. You're ten minutes from the Colosseum. Settle into your hotel and I'll take you there."

Julie swiveled her head. "Okay, Dan?"

"Way cool."

"Maybe we could talk, Bob, if we have time," Julie suggested.

"We could."

He knew their hotel. The rooms were minuscule and overpriced, given the proximity to ancient attractions. He waited in the lobby while they checked in and went upstairs to freshen up.

Though Bob Neale was graying, not much had accumulated around the middle yet. He looked vaguely collegiate in the khakis and V-necked sweaters he favored. Still, he felt old in the company of this pair.

He was a scion of a small player in an obsolete industry, and his monthly stipend had shrunk over the years. The family law firm had administered it before handing him off to lawyers he didn't know, then to this trust management concern. Once he received checks accompanied by letters; now there were computerized quarterly statements

and direct deposits at Banca di Roma.

Julie Holmes came down alone. Although he couldn't remember what she had worn, he knew she'd changed. She was dressed loosely in a light-colored something he thought was linen but probably wasn't. The contrast of the bleached-out shades pinked her cheeks.

"Dan has his laptop on, working on his project. He's a programmer," she said.

Bob was pleased. He had no particular fondness for computers or Dan. Outside Julie said, "The company paid my airfare. I thought it was generous."

"It was."

"They're sensitive to issues where, you know, personal contact is more appropriate than correspondence."

He didn't reply, wondering if he were being billed for overhead he was involuntarily generating. He rarely read the statements very carefully, the fee breakdown, the amortization schedule, the fine print.

The light changed at a crosswalk. He took her arm as she started through and a motor scooter blurred by. "Signals aren't literal in Rome."

"The city in general is safe?"

"If you use common sense. Car theft and pickpockets are the biggest problems. Keep your car locked and valuables out of sight. Heavy tourist areas attract crooks in droves. Be alert on buses with lots of visitors. One that runs from the main train station to the Vatican is known as the Wallet Eater."

Julie laughed. "Good advice anywhere. If you don't mind my ask-

ing, what was the source of your money? Our records go back just so far."

"Have you ever seen a slide rule?"

"I've heard of them."

He held up his key chain. A miniature Neale and Company slide rule served as a charm. It was a trinket that Neale sales reps once upon a time gave out to wholesalers. "The pocket calculator finished it off. We also manufactured engineering and drafting equipment. T-squares, calipers, and so forth. Computer aided design—CAD—didn't do us any good either. The family saw the handwriting on the wall and sold the company in the mid-seventies, my last year in high school. I was the sixth generation, the end of the line."

"You weren't interested in anything else?"

He shook his head.

"You went into the business. That's what a Neale did. I attended several colleges, finally graduated, and traveled. The money came in monthly, not a great amount, but I'm not extravagant."

"Do you go home?"

"I haven't for years. There's nobody left."

From their approach above street level, the Colosseum appeared suddenly. The massive stone oval always gave him the shivers. Even in ruins it was monumental, solid. The arched entrances that ringed the arena could be contemporary. A crowd inside could be howling for the Green Bay Packers.

While impressed, Julie was sluggish, yawning again.

"We don't have to go in yet," Bob

said, leading her to a sidewalk cafe. "You need caffeine."

She ordered coffees, refusing to let him pay. Traffic swirled on the boulevard separating them from the Colosseum. Pedestrians went into the crosswalks at their own risk against speeding cars and motorbikes.

"The scaffolding over on the far side and the pockmarks in the stone," she said. "You don't notice it in the photos. Are they renovating?"

"Continuously," he said, pointing to the adjacent Arch of Constantine. "There too. Ancient Rome is like Vegas in that regard, in a constant state of sprucing up and remodeling, except that things here lasted centuries, not years or months."

"The holes look blasted. Artillery during a war?"

"No. Earthquakes, wars, smog, time, they've all taken their toll," he said, ticking them off on his fingers. "The worst damage was done by scavenging for building materials. There were iron clamps in the holes. The Romans didn't use mortar to hold the Colosseum together. The iron has long since been pounded into sword blades."

She smiled. "Not plowshares?"

"Not likely. A similar problem exists with the Maya temples in Mexico's Yucatán. The Spaniards made the people dismantle them and use the blocks to build their churches."

"You've lived in the Yucatán, too?"

"Among other places. I'm what you'd call a history buff. I have a hunch that's coming to an end."

Their coffee arrived. Julie unzipped her purse. "The principal, I

think you're aware, has declined in order to maintain a given income level. Some unfortunate investments were made before we started handling your trust. Do they take dollars?"

"Everyone in the world takes dollars," Bob said, going for his wallet. "Unless I'm destitute, I'm buying."

Julie gave the waiter a twenty. "You're not destitute and *I'm* buying. Oh damn, the paperwork's in the room. I must be punchy."

He had been prepared for this sooner or later. He had been scaling back. Still. "No hurry."

"I'll bet Dan's asleep. That's all right. I'll—"

Neale raised a hand. Procrastination was in a remittance man's job description. "That's okay. Seriously, no hurry. Tomorrow. Whenever. I can show you around."

She looked at him. "You don't have to babysit us. Really."

"Not a problem," he said.

"Well, essentially, in terms of capital, an annuity is no longer practical. You're in the low five digits. It wouldn't be fair to you to not give you the option of cashing out."

"That low?" Neale was mildly and unpleasantly surprised. His entire life someone else had taken care of the money. All he'd had to do was spend.

"Weren't you forewarned?"

"There were letters. Months ago, years ago. I live modestly. I realized it would come to this—eventually."

"What will you do?"

"Something. I don't know. I'm kind of looking forward to it. Except for school, I've never had a commitment that wasn't self-imposed."

Julie Holmes yawned.

"Bob, would you be offended if we didn't go inside the Colosseum? Or do anything else? I'm absolutely exhausted."

"Not a problem," he said, finishing his coffee. "I'll go with the lump sum."

She stood. "Jet lag be damned. I'm having a siesta." He walked her to the hotel. "We can sign the papers tomorrow if you like, and I'll be out of your hair."

Bob Neale said that would be fine and went home. He lived in Trastevere, a neighborhood across the Tiber. Housewives hung their laundry out of windows, on lines. There were people of every ancestry here and restaurants that served Roman cuisine that no tour-bus tourist would ever taste.

Trastevere was losing its bohemian aura. Affluent expats were coming in, buying real estate. They'd jacked up the rent on Neale's flat twice in the last eighteen months. He'd have to move along anyway.

He'd had friends and acquaintances who came and went, out of his home and his life. When he walked them up the four flights, they'd given him that look, especially the women, silently asking if he was crazy living in this dump.

It wasn't as dumpy as it was old and tiny. The fussy wood trim, the intricate door and window hardware, the antediluvian plumbing. The books made the flat seem even smaller. They were stacked and double-stacked and triple-stacked with his hand-written journals and notebooks. Pretty soon they'd be oozing out the door.

Bob Neale had not planned on staying eight years in Italy. Italy turned out to be a museum. There was so much to see, to do, to read about. That tourists became sated and blasé within a week annoyed him. Ho-hum, yet another thousand-year-old whachamacallit and so forth.

Bob couldn't get enough history. He walked on antiquity, saw the Renaissance wherever he gazed in Rome and medievalism when he looked up at the domes and campaniles of her churches. History undated Bob Neale. Like the books he couldn't resist, history was coming out of his ears.

His vocation was his avocation. He lived to learn. He was an intellectual without portfolio, a full-time historian hobbyist. Everyone needed to work even if they didn't have to work, Bob included. Friends would peruse his writings and say, "There has to be a book in all this." There was no book, no scholarly article, nothing remunerative. Nevertheless he studied and observed and wrote. For whichever purpose or no purpose whatsoever, it was what Bob Neale did.

He sat down where there was space, by the window. Traffic edged along like sludge. Shops and bars and apartments pressed against the narrow street. There were more vehicles than there was street. He watched motor scooters generically known as vespas—wasps—slalom through the gridlock.

That's what he'd do if he had it to do again, buy a vespa and cut expenses even further.

On his cramped desk by the sill

was a Neale and Company slide rule, a device he'd had neither need nor desire to learn to use. It was a vintage model, hardwood core and old-timey plastic that looked like ivory, numbers and lines engraved like scrimshaw.

His present social life was at an ebb. There was a handful of friends he'd miss. And what would he do with the books? He spent the remainder of the day in an unusual project, something other than the absorption of knowledge. He went out to hunt for boxes.

Next morning was drizzly. He met Julie in her lobby.

"Dan and I were going to walk around town," she said. "He didn't like the looks of the weather, and besides, he's near a breakthrough on an algorithm glitch, whatever that means."

"I have an umbrella," Bob said.

"You don't have to. I have the papers."

"Perhaps at lunch."

Bob treated her to what he termed The Walk, eight brisk kilometers that skimmed many sights of the ancient city. The Trevi Fountain, made famous by *Three Coins in the Fountain*. The Spanish Steps. The Mausoleum of Augustus. The Pantheon. The Forum and the Palatine Hill. He, of course, narrated throughout.

Midway through, they stopped for lunch at Piazza Navona, a long rectangle girded by outdoor cafes. He said, "Best people-watching in town. If you sit long enough, you'll see everything."

Julie excused herself and rushed inside the cafe. When she returned,

he joked, "Can't be airsickness. It must be long-winded me."

"Morning sickness," she said.

Bob didn't know whether to offer condolences or congratulations, so he said nothing.

"Dan doesn't know yet," she said. "I was going to break it to him on this trip. Rome, the Eternal City, et cetera. Romance and passion and everything."

He gave her his napkin to dab the tears. "Three short days and his project, too," she said. "What a dumb idea."

"How far, uh, along?"

"Not very. Morning sickness comes early. I'll spring it on him when we get home."

All Bob Neale knew about babies and fetuses was where they came from. "You'll be okay, then?"

She blew her nose and forced a smile. "Oh sure. Fine. I guess we're both stalling. You on the papers, me on telling Dan."

"I'll sign them now, Julie."

She dug them out of her purse. "I haven't the foggiest how he'll react, what he'll want to do. Marriage hasn't even come up."

Bob signed without reading.

"Were you ever married?"

"A couple of near misses," he said.

"A remittance man can't be certain if she loves him, loves him not."

"You don't hear remittance man any more."

"I suppose I like the ring because it is archaic. People ask me what I do and say what's that. I say look it up. Webster defines remittance man as a person living abroad on remittance from home. Me to a tee. After they look it up, nine times in ten

there's a change in how they regard me."

"Not everybody tries to rip you off, do they?"

"No, not at all. In their eyes, I'm just in an otherworldly category."

"Like a Rockefeller or Vanderbilt."

"You can't convince them otherwise."

They had lunch, prosciutto and cheese panini and cups of gelato for dessert. Julie wolfed it down and held it down, accomplishments that buoyed her.

"I'm ready," she said.

"Let's go."

They walked along the Tiber. They crossed over to the Vatican side and took the next bridge back. Julie remarked on how narrow and placid and murky the river was, unimpressive considering its fame.

"An understandable and common reaction."

She stopped and said, "Bob, I'm seven weeks pregnant by a guy whom I may not want and who may not want me."

"That's not true," Bob said to be polite.

"No, it probably is. I've been scrutinizing him, analyzing him, angling for the perfect moment to drop my bombshell. On close examination, not everything I see I like, things that should've been obvious."

"They weren't obvious at the outset."

"How do you know?"

"Characteristics are dormant. They come out as the relationship moves along. Things are different when you take each other for granted in certain ways, at certain milestones."

"For instance, becoming intimate."

"A big big for instance," he agreed.

"I remember differences now. Little courtesies disappearing. Each one you couldn't find under a microscope. Before you know it, there's this pile."

Bob couldn't picture Dan as father of the year, let alone husband material. Eager for a new topic, he saw a church dome through a thicket of storefronts and launched into a narration.

"Nice try. You know what my problem is? I'm good at managing for others, though not so swell when it comes to myself."

"Regardless, you have to tell him."

"Yes I do."

"You have tomorrow."

"Dan's heart's set on Pompeii. I couldn't drag him on the plane unless we attempted to do Pompeii. Isn't it far? Like on the heel or toe of Italy?"

"Pompeii's on the shin, a long day-trip. It can be done. Why Pompeii?"

"It's in a video game Dan plays. The volcano blows, and you gain points by how long you avoid the pyroclastic flow."

"The plaster casts they made of the people in the ash, where their bodies were before decomposing, he says that'll be the highlight of his trip. He doesn't care about museums and churches."

"Not necessarily the right atmosphere for your news."

"True. Home in two or three days is soon enough. I'll give him his Pompeii if we can swing it. Is there a bus or train?"

Bob Neale offered to drive them.

It had been ages since he'd been to Pompeii anyhow. Julie Holmes continued to protest halfheartedly when he picked them up the next morning.

She fell quiet after they entered A1, the north-south autostrada that bisected the country. Bob accelerated the Fiat Uno to velocities at which it shuddered, then maintained pace in the slower lanes.

To their left, BMW's and Alfa Romeos hurtled by at twice their speed. Julie white-knuckled the tops of her knees. Dan sprawled in the back, clickity-clicking his keyboard. Dan didn't trust the hotel to safeguard his computer, and since he had it with him he might as well get something done.

Bob and Julie small-talked. Halfway there, Dan joined in, blinking. "Is that Monte Cassino?"

He referred to a massive monastery perched on a hilltop a few miles off. Bob said, "Yes."

"Bigtime World War II battle," Dan said. "The Nazis were dug in, blocking the highway to Rome. We had to bomb it into a rockpile. Wiped out the Germans and I forget how many monks."

"You're a student of the war?"

"It's in a video game, too," Julie said.

Dan said, "You don't have to make it sound that way."

A mass-death gamester, Bob thought. Not terribly surprising.

"Those manmade fossils they made, you know, pouring the plaster in, that's so cool. They have them stacked up down there somewhere?"

"Sorry to disappoint you," Bob said. "The majority of impressions

and other artifacts have been moved to the National Archaeological Museum in Naples."

"Bummer. The whole town wiped out, they could've preserved, you know, more for us to see."

"I'm not diminishing two thousand deaths when I say that only fifteen percent died in the eruption. In fact, survivors returned later and recovered belongings."

"Yeah, well, history may be, like, you know, repeating itself."

"How so?"

"Vesuvius is venting steam."

Bob smiled and shook his head. "Vesuvius last vented in 1944."

Dan had the final word. "Well, it was on the Internet."

Bob gave him his victory. Julie sighed. Dan resumed his project.

At the park Dan raised a concern. "Is my computer gonna be safe, or do I have to lug it around?"

"They keep an eye on the parking areas, and if your computer's in the trunk nobody will see it."

Inside the ruin Julie's eyes widened, but Dan rolled his. "This is all there is?" he asked. Time and the cataclysm had worn Pompeii to a nub. Most houses were roofless, and marble pillars stood lonely. The scene was too static for Dan, too removed from microchip mayhem. With Vesuvius quiet, Pompeii simply lacked pizzazz.

Julie asked questions and took everything in. Dan perked up only when he overheard a guide inform his group that seven hundred fifty thousand people presently lived within range of the A.D. 79 eruption.

"Whoa," he said. "The mother of all barbecues."

"There'd be some warning," Bob said. "This region suffered a major earthquake in A.D. 62, a sure sign something was happening inside the mountain. Now seismic activity is monitored closely. People would be evacuated in plenty of time."

"Except the ones who flat wouldn't go," Dan rebutted. "Like at, you know, Mount Saint Helens."

"Wishful thinking?" Julie asked.

He gave her a bewildered look and told Bob, "Women. Go figure."

From then on, Dan made a production of glancing at his watch. Julie countered by lingering at buildings longer than Bob believed she had a genuine interest. When they finished and went out, Dan setting a quickstep tempo, the car was gone.

Dan went berserk, screaming for police. The polizia did respond, two uniformed officers who listened patiently and uncomprehendingly. Dan was among those Americans who believed that shouting ever louder in English would break the language barrier.

"Don't you morons comprehend how important this project is? Can you possibly conceive?"

Bob gently interceded in Italian and learned what American car-theft victims learned: the crime was a low priority, and the vehicle might or might not be recovered. "They're doing everything they can," he translated.

"Yeah, right."

Julie touched his arm to comfort him. He pulled away. "Well, I'm not leaving until I get my laptop back. I don't give a damn how long it takes."

"Dan, our flight's tomorrow. I'm sure the police will—"

"You do what you want," he said to Julie, then to Bob, "Can you jack up these clowns, let 'em know if I don't see mucho pronto progress, I'm straight to the top."

Bob advised the polizia as diplomatically as he could. The officer he addressed cocked his head at his partner and said, "We are already at the top. He is my supervisor."

"That should energize them," Bob told Dan.

"Dan, we can leave phone numbers," Julie said.

"You do what you have to do," he said, not looking at her. "*Nobody* appreciates what I've lost. The importance."

Bob rented a car. Once they had passed Monte Cassino, Julie's tears began to dry.

Bob decided that he would go to the States, too. He'd be there for her, as a father, a big brother. He'd find work. He'd be positive. He wasn't doomed to the salt mines; he'd merely made a chronological switch of career and retirement. Perhaps he'd luck into a teaching position at a community college. Whatever her choice about the baby, he'd support it. Dan or no Dan.

His books and notes were the major stumbling block. He would hire somebody to box and ship them. He wouldn't miss the rattletrap Fiat—the thieves could have it.

In fact, they probably would not have bothered if not for the opportunity. They couldn't miss the keys in the ignition, though, not with the slide rule charm. And since he'd left the driver's door unlocked, the rest had been easy.

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the September issue.

Hurricane Helen refused to die gracefully. In full fury, this early November storm swept up the Atlantic to Maine. All the tourists had deserted Monica's Inn, fleeing inland for safety. The old rambling building creaked in the rising gale, its shutters rattling with each gust.

Around midnight Sheriff Si Parker strode into the kitchen to refuel himself with strong coffee. Monica was there, anxious about the storm.

"Things'll git worse afore they git better," he predicted dourly. "Coast road is already washed out several places."

"I know, Si," said Monica. "Earlier this evenin' seven couples straggled in here, stranded by the storm, they said. With no other guests, I put each couple on a different floor—second, third, fifth, sixth, seventh, ninth, and tenth. They registered from Pittsburgh, Queenston, Rochester, Sandusky, Toledo, Utica, and Vincennes. I asked to see their drivers' licenses; the men's ages are 23, 24, 26, 27, 29, 30, and 31. Two have red hair, two are blond, and the other three have dark hair. All seemed glad to be out of the storm."

"You shore make good coffee, Monica," said the sheriff. "Now, before I head out on patrol again, tell me more about these unexpected guests of yours."

The rain beating against the kitchen panes made Monica uneasy, and she was glad of his company. "Not much to tell," she said, reaching to refill his cup, "except—"

(1) Mr. North is two floors below the man from Rochester and two floors above Edith's husband. Their first names are Andrew, Bart, and Dan. Each has hair of a different color. None of the three is exactly 23 years old.

(2) George is on the floor just below the man from Queenston and three floors above Mr. Inman. Two of them have blond hair. None of the three is exactly 27 years old. Their wives are named Alice, Belle, and Cindy.

(3) Mr. Moore (whose hair isn't red) is two years younger than Cindy's husband and two years older than Bart.

(4) Gina's husband is on the floor just below Edward and three floors above the man from Toledo. Their last names are Hart, Kent, and Lang. Mr. Lang's hair isn't red.

(5) Mr. Hart is three years younger than Fiona's husband and three years older than Dan. Each has different colored hair.

(6) Alice's husband is two floors below Mr. Jull and just above Carl. They registered from Pittsburgh, Sandusky, and Vincennes. The one from Vincennes does not have dark hair.

(7) The man from Pittsburgh (who does not have dark hair) is three years younger than Doris's husband and three years older than Fred. And—

Monica was interrupted by a high-pitched scream from somewhere above. She and Sheriff Parker dashed to the elevator and, minutes later, located the source of the screams. It was the wife from Utica. Her husband was sitting groggily on the floor, blood oozing from his forehead.

"What happened here?" demanded the sheriff, bending to examine the wound.

"It h-h-happened so fast," the distraught woman replied. "I'm a light sleeper. I heard someone opening our door, and I sat up in bed. The man was searching through my husband's pockets. I yelled. My husband woke up and jumped out of the bed. Then the guy hit him with something. Oh, it was horrible!"

"Did you get a good look at him?"

"All I saw was that he had red hair. Of that I'm certain."

"Where did he go?"

"He ran out and took the elevator down."

"Don't worry, ma'am," said the sheriff. "Your husband isn't badly hurt, and the thief won't leave the inn in this storm. We'll get him."

Monica spoke up. "If his hair is red and he took the elevator down, I know who the thief is. It's _____."

Who was the craven thief who tried to rob the couple from Utica during the storm?

See page 208 for the solution to the June puzzle.

Prophets Who Cannot Sing

Michelle Knowlden

*... no longer let us stretch our throats
Till hoarse as frogs
With straining after notes
Which but to touch would burst an organ-pipe.
Far better be dumb dogs.*

Coventry Patmore
PROPHETS WHO CANNOT SING

Old snow blew across the road. Rising above the inky mountains to the left, the moon lit patches of snow and wild grasses on the Colorado prairie cut by a thin river of asphalt. It was hours after an early dusk, but I felt we must be close to our destination.

"I shudder to think what Clare is doing alone in the cottage. She's probably set fire to it with one of her infernal aromatherapy candles." Lavender pompoms on Aunt Helena's woolen beret bobbed as she fidgeted in the back seat and fretted about her old friend. Gregory, her erstwhile secretary and struggling poet protégé, pretended to doze next to her.

"She's had lots of practice being alone," Robyn said. "Doing research in the wilds and all. Micky—are you sure about these directions? I don't see a Red Mitt Creek Road anywhere on the map."

I took the directions from her and flattened them on the steering wheel. Instead of my usually accurate scrawl, I'd ordered the letters in painful disarray: some backwards and some upside down.

"Haven't a clue what it says." I handed the directions back to my cousin. "Looks like my dysgraphia started sooner than expected."

Helena snorted. "I hope you're satisfied, Michaela. Your hypochondria has gotten us lost. Clare probably wandered from the cottage questing after her animal voices and is now lying dead in a snowdrift."

The voices of the wind and blowing snow and winter tires against the asphalt swirled around our rental car. A sign tore off its post and tumbled across the road in front of us.

"It's chinook weather, Aunt," I said. "Those warm January winds that come over the Rockies. She won't find many snowdrifts tonight."

"Stop the car," Robyn yelled, and I jammed on the brakes. She fished around in the backpack at her feet and pulled out a brochure. Switching on the dome light, she looked across the road and then peered at the brochure. "I think that's them. Turn in the next driveway."

It did look like the picture of Tribs Turnout: three quaint cabins hun-

dreds of feet apart with lantern-shaped porch lights illuminating them. Except for a circular driveway that intersected the highway at both ends, only needle grass, tumbleweeds, and small mounds of dirt lay between them. According to the lease agent, ours had a mailbox shaped like a barn.

"Timber Creek Road." Robyn gave me a disgusted look. "You weren't even close."

I didn't argue with her, but if you switched the letters around, added one and changed one, it was dead right. I made a mental note to include it in the monograph I was preparing on the disorder.

A scrub oak obscured most of the front of the first cabin. We passed its cunning mailbox dressed up like a wedding cake. I saw a face peering out the cabin's front window as we drove slowly by. A woman's face with two hands pressed whitely to the glass. Before I could see her clearly, she jerked back and pulled the curtain across the window.

The second cabin sported a mailbox shaped like a paddleboat. Cheese-cloth curtains were drawn across the window, but I could see a shadow pacing before it. Smoke rose from its chimney.

The third cabin, thankfully, had a mailbox shaped like a barn.

Clare flung open the door as we killed the engine and peeled ourselves out of the car. "I heard the sentinel report that you were nearly here," she said and scooped Aunt Helena's hatbox and portable evidence kit out of the trunk. Her long grey hair trickled in thin ringlets past her shoulders. Her gingham dress hung on her tiny frame and dragged on the floor. Toes peeped beneath the dusty gingham hem as she scuffed up the cabin steps. Given Helena's coiffed silver hair and tailored suit, it was difficult to imagine them as sorority sisters fifty years ago.

I looked across the moonlit prairie. "I don't hear anything."

"Not now, dear. Earlier. The little ones have been asleep for hours. Hurry in. I have some coffee fresh-made and am just about to slice some applesauce cake."

Gregory and Robyn followed her willingly into the welcoming warmth while Helena fussed with the rest of her luggage. I waited with her and looked warily across the mounds for small sentinels. A flicker at the window of the first cabin caught my eye, but then its lights went out. I absently took the microscope, Polaroid camera, poison manual, and police scanner Helena thrust at me. Then the lights in our cabin and the paddleboat cabin went out, too.

"Not to worry," Clare caroled from the doorway. She held a hurricane lamp with a fat yellow candle in it. Its long flame cast dancing shadows on the porch. "We've lots of candles and a gas stove for cooking. Hurry—the teakettle's whistling."

"Don't dawdle, Michaela," Helena huffed as she passed me carrying a hatbox. "We've no time for daydreaming." Loaded down with Aunt's investigative tools, I followed in her wake.

Gregory and Robyn had lit candles in the small parlor and kitchen till the rooms blazed with light and smelled of spearmint and heather. Clare fussed with a tea cosy and laid a knife next to an applesauce cake dark with cinnamon and crumbled brown sugar.

"I've put Helena in the first bedroom with me. The two girls," Clare nodded at Robyn and me, "can use the back bedroom. The young gentleman should have the attic. A proper garret for a poet, I thought. The cabin's cramped for space, but we'll be outside most of the time we're here."

"Not me," I said promptly. "I'm writing a monograph on dysgraphia—from an informed patient's view."

"I think not." Helena gave me an arctic look. "You'll be assisting Clare and me in her rodent speech research."

"Animal linguistics, dear," Clare murmured.

"I may be doing some hiking while I'm here," Robyn said. "But I'm mainly here to get some work completed on my doctorate. I've been interrupted a lot lately by my advisor's sidetracks and Micky's murders."

"There'll be no murder here," Clare said giving me a stern look. I didn't bother telling her that a week without murder was fine with me. After all, I only showed up at the LaMare and Cardex Detective Agency to appease Helena and my uncle's conditions of gainful employment for the recipients of his trust. Gary LaMare did most of the work at the agency while I suffered through numerous and deadly ailments. In alphabetical order.

It was only the work of a moment to get our luggage stowed, Robyn's computer set up, and ourselves refreshed. Gregory had just cut his second helping of applesauce cake when someone knocked at the door.

A round elf of a man with a faintly worried look stood on the porch when I opened the door. "Miss Roseberg?" he asked lifting a tweed driving cap.

I shook my head. "Micky Cardex. Did you want Clare?"

I stepped back into the cabin, and he followed me in. He tipped his cap again towards the table. "My name's Horner. I'm just checking to see if you ladies are doing fine," he said, ignoring Gregory reaching for a third slice of cake. "Jacky said there'd be several of you in the barn cabin starting today. The lights go out often when there's a wind, and I wanted to make sure you were fine." He looked askance at the crowd of candles. "I brought an extra flashlight if you can use it."

"That'd be lovely, Mr. Horner," Clare said, reaching for the heavy flashlight. "My, that's just the right size for my morning talk with the little ones."

"Little ones?" he asked.

"Is it not *Dr. Horner*?" Helena asked imperiously. "I believe Miss Ames said it was Dr. Horner and his wife Kathryn."

He tipped his hat again, more nervous twitch than actual courtesy, I suspected. "Country vet from Kansas. Been coming here every Christmas for thirty years to the wedding cake cabin. Jacky Ames is my wife's sister. When I retired last summer, we moved here permanent."

"Splendid," Clare said. "I may have to consult with you, Dr. Horner. We have animals in common."

"In common? What do you . . ."

"And your wife, where is she?" Helena interrupted again.

Dr. Horner, understandably, was growing vexed. Most people do after being in Aunt Helena's company more than ten minutes.

"My wife? She's not feeling well. Some sort of bug going around, I expect."

I perked up. "And what are her symptoms?"

"Oh for heaven's sake, Michaela. Let the man alone." Brandishing the cake knife at Dr. Horner, Aunt Helena asked, "And why are you not at home taking care of the poor woman?"

"Because I came to see if you were . . . oh, never mind!" He wheeled around and plunged out the door. Clare followed him, waving the flashlight. "Thank you for this, sir. We'll return it when the electricity comes back on." She had to yell the last words as he fled the cabin at great speed.

She shut the door firmly behind her. "Poor man. I met his wife earlier when I went over to borrow some nutmeg. Dr. Horner wasn't in, and I couldn't make any sense out of his wife. I doubt it's the flu she's got. I'd say she was quite mad. Panting, raving, and gulping with terror, she was. Dr. Horner seems quite nice, though, don't you think? What a tragedy."

I frowned. "She was gulping with terror? Gulping how? And why?"

Helena glared at me. "We'll not be able to discover that now, will we, Michaela? After you chased him away with your incessant questions."

Helena then gave her old college friend an equally exasperated look. "Clare, you must learn the proper methods of interrogation. First, divest him of his coat so he can't escape so quickly. Then ply him with tea and cake for the same reason. A man coatless and waiting for the kettle to boil can be brought to the point on a dozen matters."

Clare gave Helena a puzzled look. "But dearest Helena, I'd just made the tea."

"He needn't know that."

Robyn grinned. "Don't listen to her, Clare. This cabin's too small to hold more than one person as devious as Aunt Helena."

"Hear, hear," I said.

At that moment another knock sounded on the door. "Egad," Robyn complained. "Where's all that wilderness solitude promised in the brochure?"

Nearest to the door, I answered it again. This time a man as tall as I at five foot ten inches and as cadaverously thin stood upon our portal. My pallor and weight were due to frequent illness; I could not immediately fathom if his lean build was also due to chronic illness. Unlike the more portly visitor earlier, this one had no hat and his black hair was shot with gray.

"Invite him in," Helena barked.

"Please come in," I said obediently, though I first thought of warning him off.

He blinked in the sudden blaze of candlelight with the air filled with smoke and smells of applesauce cake and scented wax. Clare leapt at the man and dragged his coat off his shoulders. "Let me take your coat," she belatedly offered, and took it to another room.

"Please sit down," Helena said. "I assume you are Mr. Reston from the paddleboat cabin next door?"

He sat carefully in the chair I'd vacated and eyed the applesauce cake. "Dr. Reston. Yes. I just dropped by to see if you all were okay. With the lights out and all."

Helena slid a slice of cake onto a plate and handed it to him. "Quite fine, thank you. Clare, do start another pot of tea for Dr. Reston, would you?"

Clare snapped her fingers and smoothed her gingham dress. "Of course. I nearly forgot. The time it takes to boil the water . . ." She clamped a hand over her mouth and went quickly into the kitchen.

"What . . ." Dr. Reston stared blankly after her.

"Are you a veterinarian like Dr. Horner?" Helena asked hastily.

Reston suddenly glowered. "No. A medical researcher. Horner's an imbecile. He shouldn't be allowed to work on even a rat."

Clare popped back into the doorway holding a sloshing kettle. "And what, sir, do you mean by 'even a rat'? Rats are lovely creatures with quite a repertoire of oral history and epic songs. They are not all squeak and whiskers, you know."

Helena ignored her. "Ah? So you know Dr. Horner?"

Reston gave Clare another bewildered look but answered readily. "I've known him and Kath—Mrs. Horner, for over thirty years. We hail from the same town in Kansas. I've spent all my vacations and sabbaticals from the university in the paddleboat cabin. Jacky Ames even lets me keep my reference books and notes locked in a trunk in its attic."

"Did you know Mrs. Reston is ill?" I asked. I started to reach for a slice of cake, but Helena rapped my knuckles smartly. Evidently it was to be used only for interrogation purposes.

His face took on a troubled look. "Some weeks ago she had some sort of rash or insect bite on her arm and asked me to look at it. I gave her ointment, and it seemed all right. A few days ago she came over and said something was terribly wrong with her arm, but she seemed to be making a fuss over nothing. It looked a little irritated, but with her rubbing it the way she was, it was not surprising. She claimed it was numb and painful."

He pushed the cake away and rubbed his eyes wearily. "I thought maybe nettles, but there aren't any around here, especially in January and nettle sting could not have lasted this long." He heaved a sigh. "She is often ill. Always has been. I first dismissed it as more of the same, but lately I've wondered if that husband of hers caused it."

I lifted my head. "Caused what?"

"A nervous condition. He seems the sort to cause psychological distress."

"Husbands," Helena sneered; the purple pompoms bounced. "Always watch the husbands, Dr. Reston. That's the golden rule of detective work."

"Detective work?" He grinned, the edges of his narrow face relaxed. "Mrs. Cardex, are you another Miss Marple?"

Aunt Helena drew herself up. "Sir, I am no amateur sleuth. I am a professional."

"But that's not why she's here," Clare said. She shot her former sorority sister a quelling look, which didn't faze Helena. "We're doing field work on prairie dog language."

He laughed. "Jacky sure can pick the winter rentals. Ladies (and sir)," he nodded at Gregory, "I hope your stay is pleasant."

I opened the door for him while Clare fussed with his coat. The wind wailed through the trees and rattled shingles on the other two cabins. In the wedding cake cabin, a hand hastily dropped the curtain at the front window. This time it was a man's hand.

By midmorning the next day, the night wind had cleared the snow from the plains outside Tribes Turnout, and it was unseasonably warm. Per Clare's direction, we'd positioned ourselves around the prairie dog town with pen, paper, and tape recorder. In my present state the pen and paper would be of no use, but unless an onslaught of dyslexia struck, I could still distinguish the RECORD button from PLAY.

From atop a small knoll behind the wedding cake cabin, I found a quiet spot in the scrub, hidden from Aunt Helena's view. Along with a thermos of Clare's Cannon Powder tea, I brought *Biddle's Medical Encyclopedia* just in case a change in symptoms flared. It was also a reference for my dysgraphia monograph. Who knew? If the prairie dogs were silent, maybe I'd find time to finish it.

As the morning wore down, I watched the wedding cake cabin more than the mounds before me. No hand disturbed the curtains. Perhaps its inhabitants still slept. Or perhaps they only stood as quiet watchers at the front of the cabin. Dr. Horner and his nervous wife. If I cricked my neck far to the left (which I didn't, as I'd settled myself too comfortably to bother), I could see Dr. Reston's paddleboat cabin. Not that it was any of my business, but Dr. Reston seemed somewhat oversolicitous of another man's wife.

There was no movement in the mound directly in front of me, but to the left a prairie dog stretched out of his hole and yipped. Behind him two prairie dogs on two different mounds, their tan hair bristling, echoed his yips in a desultory way. It'd begun as I'd walked up and hadn't ceased for a moment. In Clare's briefing this morning, she'd gone over a dozen vocalizations: ones that signaled trespass into their colony, others that signaled danger, a specific one for coyote and hawk sightings, and one for burial detail. Prairie dogs are one of the few creatures that bury their dead.

The leftmost prairie dog began to kick dirt from its burrow's entrance.

Its small tail flicked up and down. Then it stood high, giving me stare for stare, and never ceased yipping.

The final vocalization was Clare's own theory. It had to be recorded during midday hours when the sun stood high overhead with no threat in the air and no dead needing burial. Clare contended that this particular yipping was the telling of prairie dogs' local histories and prophecies, passed from mound to burrow lest they be forgotten.

Clare played samples of the vocalizations several times during breakfast so we could differentiate between them. I think it may be a previously unrecorded symptom of dysgraphia that made the yips sound identical to me. I made a note of the possible tie between audio clues and writing chaos: "Psbile tye foe zownz rite mess."

Robyn half-heartedly suggested leaving planted recorders near the burrows and retrieving them later. Both Helena and Clare vetoed that idea. They were hands-on people believing in the value of eyewitness accounts. I took a sip of Cannon Powder tea and closed my eyes.

"Hello?"

Fuzzily, I woke up. A woman in her late fifties stood over me, her high heels crusted with red dirt and her form-fitting suit creased. Except for a small smear of mascara under her left eye, her makeup was precisely applied.

I looked past her, but my vocal companions of moments ago had disappeared. Not one sentinel had warned of her approach.

"Miss Roseberg, I'm Jacky Ames. We talked on the phone."

"Sorry, Miss Ames. I'm Micky Cardex, not Clare Roseberg. I think you'll find her farther out that way." I waved vaguely towards the empty plains.

She looked doubtfully at her shoes, then at me. "Hmm. I told Miss Roseberg I'd check in on her today, but perhaps you'll do. Are you finding everything to your satisfaction?"

"Yes. Well, perhaps it's a little remote in case of a medical emergency."

Her glance, which had been straying towards the other cabins, shot back immediately to my face. "A medical emergency? What makes you say that?" Her voice almost reached the high-pitched yip of a prairie dog.

"My own ill health makes me say that. I've just recently recovered from bouts of dengue fever and dysentery." I gave her a long look. "Are you concerned about your sister's recent illness, Miss Ames? From her husband's description, she should have immediate attention."

Jacky Ames laughed, but it was a brittle laugh. "I assure you, Miss Cardex, Kath is already getting more attention than she deserves. Whenever she feels short of attention, she trots out some new ailment. Her husband hovers over her, and Bill Reston hovers over her. It's not their attention or medical attention she needs." She glared at the wedding cake cabin.

"Chronic illness, Miss Ames," I said stiffly, "is not something to sneer at. My own history . . ."

"Trust me, Miss Cardex, my sister is not ill. She's a fraud." She wheeled

on a narrow heel and stalked off. "Ignore her and she'll snap out of it. That's what I do."

I watched her head for her car. There are reasons I'm glad I am an only child. Just as she reached the car, she veered not towards her sister's cabin but over to Dr. Reston's. She angrily pounded on the door, pushing her way in after Reston answered. He glanced towards me, then shut the door.

The mounds in front of me were still empty of prairie dogs, as empty as my thermos of Cannon Powder tea. Our cabin was farthest from where I sat and contained no one to make tea. The Horners' cabin was just a few yards away. Perhaps now would be the right time to meet the phantom Mrs. Horner of the many diseases. We might have a common history. I climbed down the knoll for her cabin.

When I knocked on the door, the lace curtain on the porch window twitched faintly. The door opened a crack, and I heard a faint panting sound.

"Mrs. Horner?" I tried to peer into the gloomy room. "Mrs. Horner, I'm Micky Cardex from the barn cabin. I was wondering if you have any tea?" I shook my thermos at the cracked door hopefully.

"Micky Cardex the detective?" a soft voice rasped.

"Sometimes I detect. This week I'm taking dictation from prairie dogs."

The door opened five more inches. "Please come in, Miss Cardex. Hurry before they see you."

I squeezed through the door into a room lit only by dying embers in the fireplace. Mrs. Horton stood near me wearing a grimy nightgown. Her face was pallid, she literally wheezed for every breath, and her hands, twisting over and over, were slick with sweat. If her sister was correct and she was faking her sickness, Mrs. Horner deserved an Academy Award.

I handed her my thermos. "I prefer herbal tea, if you have it. Unsweetened, please."

She didn't seem to see it. Her eyes focused unblinking on my face. "I read how you solved the Rostanovich case when no one else could. The papers said you were brilliant."

"Yes, they did go on, didn't they? You wouldn't happen to have any tea with rosemary in it? I understand it's good for memory, and I'm having difficulty with my writing recently. Dysgraphia. Have you heard of it?"

"Miss Cardex, you must help me. I think my husband's trying to kill me."

I swallowed. "Ah?"

She lurched across the room and sank to the floor in front of the dying fire. She mumbled something too low for me to hear. Her gaze never faltered—she stared at me as if I were her only hope.

I cleared my throat. "Why do you think your husband is trying to kill you?"

"He knows. You see, he knows. Jacky said so. She knows, too. Only I was in the dark. Me and Bill Reston."

"Knows what, Mrs. Horner?" I tried to speak soothingly, but the look

in her eyes grew more distracted, and her fingers began a frantic plucking at her frayed sleeves.

"About me and Bill Reston. Everyone knows. My husband knows."

"What about you and Dr. Reston?" Her gaze remained fixed on my face, but she only shook her head.

"Were you and Dr. Reston having an affair, and your husband found out?" I asked gently.

She shook her head violently; her fingers played a wild crescendo in her hair. "No! Not Bill and me. Not me and Bill." Her right hand darted back down to her left sleeve, and she roughly thrust her arm up. "He did this. He did. See?"

To humor her I gingerly took her thin arm in my hand, but there was nothing to see. A crafty look crept into her eyes, and she sidled away from me. She paced like a caged jackal back and forth in front of the fireplace. "You know, don't you. You know, too. Tell me."

"Mrs. Horner."

"Tell me!" The scream reverberated in the cabin.

I let the silence settle for a moment. "Mrs. Horner, where is your husband?"

For a moment I didn't think she'd answer me. "The phone's dead. All dead. He went into town to call the phone company. So he says. I say he's left me here to die. Left us all here to die. Me. Bill. You."

A chill ran through my blood. Were the phones really out, or was this just another part of her ravings? If they were out, had it been the wind that had knocked them out, or was there something more sinister behind it? And why had Dr. Horner left his wife when there was something so badly wrong with her?

As if she could read my mind, she said, "He tried to drug me with his animal medicine, but I was too smart for him. I didn't drink any of the poisons he gave me. Just pretended to. Good at pretending. Jacky says so. Ask her if you like. He tried to get me to go with him, but I fought him. Car didn't work anyway. None of the cars work. He made sure of that."

"Did your husband walk into town?" She didn't answer, but I saw it in the sly look that seeped back into her eyes. That plump old man. It was at least seventeen miles to the nearest town. Why hadn't he come to our cabin and asked for help?

"Warn Bill. Not safe. After I'm dead, he'll go after him."

"You're not going to die," I said automatically. "Neither is Dr. Reston. Your sister's with him now."

Kathryn Horner wearily sank to the floor, but her fingers continued to scrabble in the folds of her nightgown. "Poor Jacky," she crooned. "Bill always loved me best. Even with me married, he never looked at anyone else. Not her. Not anyone."

"Mrs. Horner?" But she didn't look up. She just repeated "not anyone, not anyone" over and over.

"Mrs. Horner? I won't be gone long."

As I left her, her hands twisted the stained nightgown, and she mumbled gibberish in the same pitch as a prairie dog bark. There was no way to lock the door from the outside, but I wasn't sure if she was more dangerous to herself or someone was truly trying to kill her. I could not believe her husband, that little man who visited us last night, would murder his wife no matter what suspicions he might have about Reston. After a brief moment's thought, I jammed a porch chair against the doorknob and headed for Reston's paddleboat cabin.

I took a quick look across the prairie. No point in involving the others. Adding Aunt Helena would only complicate things and irritate the strangers here. I saw Helena waving something large and yellow at Gregory. Too far away to distinguish words, I could only hear the faint roar of her voice. Gregory was hunched over a logbook and appeared to be wearily entering data on its pages.

In a depression between a stand of dogwood and a shallow pond, Clare sat with one hand extending a microphone toward a mound where a prairie dog obligingly prophesied via a lengthy diatribe of yips. Robyn sat even farther out, her fingers pounding the keys of her laptop.

Carefully keeping the trees between Helena and me, I hurried up the steps to Reston's door and knocked. Jacky Ames answered.

"Miss Ames, I think it's best if you see your sister right away. There's something very wrong with her, and trust me—she's not faking." Jacky frowned and shot a quick look at Reston. I looked at him, too. "Sir, is your phone in working order? We'd best call 911."

Both of them spoke at once, Jacky with "Miss Cardex, surely you're overreacting" and Reston with "Good God, I was afraid of this."

"Your phone, Dr. Reston." He ran his hand distractedly in his gray salted hair. "Of course. In the kitchen."

As I picked up the receiver, I heard Jacky Ames say insistently, "Bill, you can't believe anything's wrong. You know how Kathryn is." She plucked at his sleeve, but he shook her off and followed me into the kitchen.

I replaced the receiver. "Your phone's dead, too. I don't suppose either of you has a cell phone?" When both of them shook their heads, I said, "I don't have much hope that our cabin's phone is working either. Dr. Reston, do you have anything that will quiet Mrs. Horner? In her present state we wouldn't be able to manhandle her into one of our cars without damaging her and ourselves."

"Oh please," Jacky said and rolled her eyes.

"I've got something that should help," Reston said. "What was she doing when you left her?"

"She was incoherent and confused. Having trouble breathing and swallowing. Incessant movement of her hands, and pacing back and forth. Restless and paranoid." I hesitated, then added, "She thinks her husband poisoned her."

Jacky rolled her eyes again, but Reston looked thoughtful. "There are drugs that could cause those symptoms. Where is he anyway?"

"Mrs. Horner said he walked into town to get help."

Reston nodded as if that was the most natural thing to do. "Right. Let me get a few things and let's see to Kath."

Moments later we were back at the Horners' wedding cake cabin. I scuttled in the shadows between the cabins, mindful of Aunt Helena's watchful eye, while Reston strode purposefully down the driveway. Jacky followed reluctantly, still protesting her sister's pretenses.

At the front of the cabin Jacky suddenly fell silent. The door, with the porch chair anchoring it, shook violently. Inside the cabin Kathryn Horner was throwing herself against it.

Gingerly I pulled the chair away and nodded at Reston. We rushed through the door and caught her before she could launch herself at it again. It took both of us to wrestle her to the ground while Jacky stood uselessly in the doorway. "Kathy?" she whispered uncertainly.

"Hold her," Reston said brusquely to me. "I can't give her the injection with her moving around like this."

"I'm trying," I gritted. The doctor's wife seemed to have superhuman strength, and while she threw herself from side to side, she grunted and groaned like a caged beast.

"Give me that." Jacky grabbed the hypodermic and, with both Reston and me pinning Mrs. Horner to the floor, injected her with the drug. A few seconds later Kath Horner slipped into unconsciousness.

Reston scooped her up and took her into the bedroom. Jacky and I followed and watched as he laid her gently on the bed.

"She looks terrible," Jacky said. "Do you think she's really sick?"

"Yes," Reston said shortly. "She's burning up with fever. We need to get her to the hospital."

"Your car's closest," I told Jacky.

She nodded. "I'll bring it to the door." She spared her sister another uncertain look, then sprinted for her car.

"Still think it could be drugs?" I asked Reston.

He shook his head. "Doubt it. Looks like a virus of some kind. Are you sure she accused her husband of causing this?"

"That's what she said."

He shook his head again. Jacky reappeared in the doorway. Her face was ashen. "Something's wrong with my car. It won't start."

I immediately stood up. "Let me check our car." This time I dashed across the driveway, not taking the time to hide from Helena. Too much was at stake. I grabbed the keys in our cabin and tried starting the car. Nothing. Not even a click. I raised the hood and saw right away what the problem was. Someone had removed the starter motor.

After I briefed Jacky and Reston on the situation, we adjourned to Kath

Horner's bedroom. She slept fitfully, breathing badly and gulping painfully. Jacky soaked a washcloth in the sink and tried to cool her down.

"Perhaps some weak tea," I suggested. "I could use some, too. And if you have any ginkgo biloba powder, you might bring that in also." At Reston's questioning look I said, "It's supposed to help brain activity, and handicapped as I am with dysgraphia, I could use some."

"Can we trust that Horner really went into town for help?" Reston asked.

"Can we trust that he could make it?" I countered. "He didn't look in great shape."

"On the contrary," Jacky said. She was back in the bedroom with a pitcher of lemonade. "Ted's a hiker; that's one of the reasons he retired to Colorado. The walk into town would have been nothing to him."

"Tea?" I asked.

"I found this instead." Jacky poured a glass and gave it to Reston. "Bill, you don't think Ted hobbled the cars, do you?"

"Only if he were trying to cover up what he'd done to Kath."

"Hadn't he left before you arrived, Miss Ames?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I'm pretty sure I saw him before I walked over to talk with you. He could have been the one who sabotaged my car."

I sighed. "We need to send someone else into town, just in case Dr. Horner doesn't make it." I closed my eyes briefly and, since I was at least twenty years younger than the others, decided it was up to me to make the sacrifice. "I'll get Robyn to go."

I managed to make it to where Robyn was pounding on her dissertation without alerting Helena. She'd left off haranguing Gregory and was now arguing with Clare near the pond.

It took only a moment to brief my cousin on what had happened. She ran to get her hiking boots and a bottle of water and head off towards the town of Tribute. On the way back to the wedding cake cabin I stopped at Jacky's car and checked her engine compartment. Her starter motor was missing, too.

I detoured up to where I'd been monitoring the prairie dogs earlier, to retrieve my things. All the mounds were still quiet, which I thought odd. The sentinels should have been sounding the alert as I came up on them. It reminded me of how quiet they'd been when Jacky had met me there earlier.

There was a furtive movement on the center mound. A prairie dog, not one of the three that had been out earlier, darted out of the mound. It dived at me. Startled, I stumbled backwards. It made a convulsive run past me, beelining it for a thicket of aspens.

It was soon out of sight. Wondering if I'd just witnessed a midday prophecy, I gathered my things and headed back to the cabin.

In the wedding cake cabin Reston held Mrs. Horner's hand while Jacky watched with a sour look on her face. Kath Horner moved restlessly in the bed.

"My cousin is on her way into town," I informed them. "How's Mrs. Horner doing?"

"Too bad she's asleep," Jacky grumbled. "Kath would love all this attention."

"For God's sake, Jacky," Reston said. She glared at him and stalked out of the room.

Reston shot me an apologetic look. "Sorry to throw you into our little mess here. Jacky doesn't mean to sound as harsh as she does."

"It's not really any of my business," I assured him. "Would you like me to make some tea?"

"No, I'm fine. You see Jacky used to work for Ted Horner. Was his veterinarian's assistant a long time ago. I think she had a thing for old Ted. I dated her sister back then, but once Ted got a look at Kath, that was it as they say. She broke it off with me, and they got married a few months later." Reston gave Kathryn Horner a look that might have been longing or regret or old affection. Not dissimilar to the look I was giving the thermos I still clutched in my hand. When I unscrewed the lid, it still smelt faintly of Cannon Powder tea.

"Don't think it went badly for Jacky, though." Reston gave me a severe look. "She got her realtor's license and made a bundle. She owns the three cabins here and about a third of Tribute."

I glanced at my watch. Nearly lunchtime, but the possibility of a meal seemed as likely as a pot of tea.

Reston crossed his legs. "Don't think I pined for her. Research has been good to me for thirty years now. I'm a name of sorts in my field. That's enough for me." Reston gently smoothed Kath Horner's hair as she shuddered in twilight sleep.

"Perhaps I'll run over to my cabin," I offered. "When Mrs. Horner awakens, she may want some tea. Maybe a bite to eat, too."

"Miss Cardex, I want you to know that if Horner is responsible for what's happened to Kath, I won't rest till he pays for it. And if he's run off, I'll find him."

"That won't be necessary, Dr. Reston. I've found him for you."

Reston and I turned to see Clare and Aunt Helena standing in the doorway. Helena had a disheveled Horner by the collar.

"Oh hell," I said.

Horner wrenched himself from Helena's grasp and pushed Reston and me aside to get to his wife. "Kath," he said and patted her on the cheek. "Wake up, sweetheart." He looked at me. "What's going on? What's wrong with her?"

"Your wife is very ill, Dr. Horner," I said. "Dr. Reston's given her a sedative."

He glared at Reston. "You've no right to practice medicine on my wife. If you've hurt her, so help me, you'll pay."

"Dr. Reston was saying the same thing about you," I said mildly.

Clare spoke up. "Micky, dear, what happened here?"

"About an hour ago I found Mrs. Horner agitated. She told me her husband had tried to poison her and then left for town. Since the phones are dead, I asked Dr. Reston to examine her."

Just then Jacky Ames walked back into the room and blinked. Ignoring her brother-in-law, she said, "Good God. Who are all these people?"

I introduced her to Clare and Aunt Helena, then asked, "Dr. Horner, did you tell your wife that you were heading into town?"

He shook his head. "She was on me about the phone's being dead, so I told her that just to quiet her. After a windstorm like last night's, the phones are always down for hours. I actually went for a hike along the creek."

"Didn't you see that your wife was seriously ill, sir?" I asked.

"Kath exaggerates her illnesses, Miss Cardex. She always has."

"That's what I told them," Jacky said.

I gestured at the bed.

"This is no exaggeration. Your wife is gravely ill."

Scratching his head, he frowned at the still form on the bed. "She looks drugged to me." He cast another angry look at Reston.

Reston stirred. "We thought maybe you'd drugged her. But after examining her, I now think you've given her some sort of virus."

Helena nodded with satisfaction. "What did I tell you? It is always the husband."

Ignoring her, Horner's eyes narrowed on Reston. "Me? You're the medical researcher. How do we know that those are really vitamin shots you say you've been giving her? Maybe you've infected her with this virus."

"Vitamin shots?" I asked.

"It was right after that that Kath started complaining about feeling sick," Horner told me.

"Don't be a fool," Reston said shortly. "It was nowhere near that time. It was months later."

"Some viruses take months to manifest symptoms," I said.

"Do you think Dr. Reston tried to murder the poor woman?" Clare asked me. Her gentle blue eyes crinkled with distress.

"I was just making an observation," I said. "Tea, anyone?"

"Where is your duty as a detective?" Helena snapped at me. "Murder's been attempted, and you talk about tea?"

"You're a detective?" Jacky Ames asked. She seemed to pale.

Clare nodded eagerly. "She's *the* Micky Cardex, you know. No one gets away with murder when she's on the case."

"They really were vitamin shots," Reston gave me a worried look. "I would never hurt Kath. I couldn't."

"Clare, fetch Gregory," Helena ordered. "I need a complete statement from each suspect. Gregory will take notes." Clare immediately dashed

out of the cabin. "Michaela, bring in chairs from the kitchen. This may take some time. I assume you've sent for the authorities?"

"Yes, ma'am. Robyn left some time ago."

"Good." Helena nodded approvingly "Sometimes even you show good sense. The rest of you will remain here till the police arrive."

Helena appropriated the first chair I took in from the kitchen and eyed each suspect with narrowed eyes. Jacky shifted uncomfortably, but Reston and Horner didn't seem to notice. They were too busy glaring at each other while positioning themselves close to Kathryn Horner. Gregory slouched into the room moments later and took up pen and paper with a theatrical sigh.

Clare tugged at my sleeve. "My dear, shall we make some tea?"

Thankfully, I followed her into the kitchen. She filled the kettle with pump water and set it on a burner. While it heated, she pulled a packet of leaves from her knapsack and popped it into a teapot. "Cannon Powder?" I asked hopefully.

She shook her head. "Trail Tucker tea. We need the antioxidants." She gave me a troubled look. "Micky—do you believe Mrs. Horner's illness was deliberately given to her?"

"I'm afraid so."

"How terrible. The poor woman. Who could do such a wicked thing?"

"A desperate measure, Clare. I'm not sure it was understood that the illness would be fatal."

Clare's hand went to her lips. "Fatal? Oh my dear. Are you saying she will die?" The teakettle whistled, causing us both to jump. Clare pulled it off the burner and poured it into the teapot, letting the leaves steep the hot water to a blue-black color.

"It was never meant to go this far," I said. "But, yes, I'm afraid she can't be saved now." Hearing footsteps come down the hall, I stopped. A haggard Jacky Ames walked into the kitchen. She halted upon seeing us, then her eyes suddenly filled with tears.

"Kathy just woke up, but she didn't even know me. She's really sick, isn't she?"

Clare leapt to her side and patted her arm. "Come, dear. Sit down. Let me fix you a cup of tea."

"Will she die?" Jacky asked me. Her lips trembled. Before I could answer, Clare patted her arm again and steered her to the table.

"Let's not dwell on negative thoughts. Think only positive thoughts, and perhaps that may help your sister. Now drink a cup of tea. It'll do you good."

I sipped at my own cup of tea and felt it do me good. I wondered if it repaired short-circuited brain synapses. I could almost feel reconnections being made in my own gray matter.

"That horrid woman is blaming Kath's husband for this," Jacky said. "But that can't be so. He's the most gentle of men. In fact, he could nev-

er give his animal patients injections. I always had to do it for him. Kath after me."

"I noticed you were skilled at it," I said. "When you gave your sister the sedative earlier."

"Yes, well," she preened, then shot me a sudden suspicious look. "What did you mean by that?" I shrugged and sniffed at the Trail Tucker tea. It'd begun to cloy in the cup.

"You don't think I'm capable of hurting Kathy, do you?" she demanded. "She's my sister."

"I'm not accusing you, Miss Ames." I took a small sip of the tea and let it roll on my tongue for a moment. It might be improving my brain matter, but it looked foul.

"You probably think the worst of family squabbles, but I love her. Sure she can be a pain with all her imaginary illnesses. It's just her way of getting attention, and I understand that. And don't think we were rivals in love. I heard Bill Reston telling you that nonsense about her stealing first Ted Horner, then Bill from me. Believe me, once I figured out that they wanted the fainting frail kind of woman like Kath then it was *I* who dumped *them*."

I took two more small sips of the tea and decided I liked the Cannon Powder tea better. I glanced up to see Jacky Ames glaring at me. "I believe you've mentioned your sister's desire for attention several times," I said. "Do you have anything to offer that's germane to your sister's illness?"

"Think what you like," she snapped. "You'll do so anyway. But I swear, be careful of your accusations. Slander me, and I'll sue."

I stared after her, puzzled, as she flounced off, then turned to Clare. "Didn't I say that I was *not* accusing her?"

Before Clare could respond, Bill Reston strode into the kitchen. "Is your aunt mad?" he demanded.

"Not mad," I said. "Just annoying." Years ago the Cardex cousins had tried, in our half-hearted way, to have Aunt Helena declared unfit in her executor duties over Uncle's trust. The court mediator had come to the same conclusion. Not mad, not unfit, just annoying.

"Dr. Reston," Clare said, "I think a pot of tea would do us all good. If you wouldn't mind carrying the tray?" Quickly she loaded the teapot with more of the purpling tea, piled cups and saucers onto the tray, and thrust it into Dr. Reston's hands. She led the way down the hall. Dr. Reston and I followed, equally reluctant.

Jacky Ames was looking out the window, the set of her shoulders tight. Outside, a single prairie dog sentinel stood upright on a mound, matching her stare for stare. Jacky's back quivered slightly at the sounds her sister was making. Dr. Horner held his wife's hand, but it did little to still her thrashing on the bed or quiet the dry gurgling sounds in her throat. Kathryn Horner's eyes were wide open, but she seemed unaware of anything or anyone in the room.

Clare halted in the doorway and threw me an uncertain look. She spoke in a whisper, but the room was too small for it to be unheard by those there. "Micky dear, if you know who has done this, you should name him now. If we don't restrain him, perhaps he'll escape before the police arrive."

Before I could say anything, Helena rose from her chair. "Excellent idea, Clare. Perhaps you could find some thick rope to bind Dr. Horner."

Except for a single brief scowl Horner ignored her. During the time we'd left Aunt to her interrogations, he'd grown hardened to her gibes.

"Not necessary, Aunt," I said. "No one will be leaving." Jacky Ames, Reston, and Horner glared suspiciously at each other, then nodded in agreement. Seeing the sick woman continue to move helplessly on the bed, I added, "Only Mrs Horner needs restraint. It'd be a kindness now."

Jacky Ames and Clare searched the bureau and found several scarves. Gently they tied her down while the men watched in mute agony.

"Perhaps Mrs. Horner's nightgown should be changed," I suggested. "The ambulance won't be here for another few hours, and it might make her more comfortable in the meantime."

"I'll do it," Jacky said defiantly. "I know you think I had something to do with Kathy's being sick, but she wouldn't want strangers undressing her."

"She's my wife," Horner began indignantly.

"I'm a doctor," Reston said fiercely. "It would give me the chance to examine her symptoms more closely."

"You stay away from my wife. She's not one of your experiments."

I stepped between the two angry men and pushed them both out the door. "It's best for Mrs. Horner if we leave the room. Your fighting helps nothing. Clare, if you would bring the tray into the sitting room?"

"I will remain with the victim," Helena decided. "If there are any strange markings on her body, I will describe them for the record. Gregory, pick up your pen." Gregory paled with horror and hurriedly turned his chair away from the bed.

As the two men stormed out of the room, Clare whispered, "Is it safe to leave them alone with the poor woman?"

I shrugged. "Aunt Helena can only do so much damage to an unconscious woman."

She sighed and carried the tea tray down the hall. "We can't leave now, but if only we could hear the prophecies of our small sentinels. Perhaps the truth of what's happened here is in their burrow songs."

"I find their prophets who cannot sing more illuminating."

Before Clare could ask my meaning, we entered the sitting room where the two men stood with fists clenched and chins outthrust. Undoubtedly a posture they'd perfected over the thirty years of their acquaintance. I handed cups of the thick tea to each one. They took them with poor grace, retiring to chairs in different corners.

I reclined wearily on the sofa and doodled on my prairie dog dictation

pad. Perhaps the tea was having an effect, for I could make sense out of every third word. Cheering slightly, I poured myself another cup of tea. Clare perched silently by the fireplace, darting worried looks at the two men. I decided it was up to me to initiate a conversation.

"Dr. Reston, may I ask what research you're conducting? Something to do with vitamins?"

He snorted. "If you think I'll discuss my research with this animal doctor listening, think again. He steals my ideas. I will say this—it's not about vitamins."

Horner folded his arms and gave Reston an arrogant look. "I'll tell you what it is, Miss Cardex. I know because he's stolen my idea for research. As always."

Reston erupted from his seat in a rage, but Horner continued without blinking. "He's studying hydrophobia, just as I am."

I raised my eyebrows. "Hydrophobia. How interesting." Because of my alphabetical immune dysfunction, I find most medical research fraught with errors but often entertaining. "Do go on," I said.

Horner folded his arms over his plump belly and gave me a complacent look.

"I'm studying the effects of the disease in a colony setting. The spread, the term, and the intensity level of the infection. I'm covering ground never investigated before now."

Reston snorted.

I frowned. "A colony, you say? Isn't hydrophobia mostly found in bats?"

Clare leaned towards me. "Micky, what are you talking about? What is this hydrophobia?"

"Rabies, Clare. Hydrophobia is more commonly known as rabies."

She looked outraged at Horner. "Sir, I hope you've not infected a colony of bats. They have a subharmonic night song of such sweetness it would make you weep."

He shifted uncomfortably in his Shaker chair. "Not bats. Prairie dogs."

Clare sat rigid with horror. "No," she whispered.

I nodded somberly. "I'm afraid yes." I turned back to Horner. "This is not good science, sir. Even if I agreed with experimenting on animals, what kind of control did you expect, loosing infected animals into the prairie?"

"It was an accident," he muttered. "One of the beasts escaped right after Kath injected it. We hoped the virus hadn't taken."

"It had."

His eyes squeezed shut, and he slouched unhappily. Reston sneered at him.

"You were no good as a vet, Horner. What made you think you could be a scientist?"

"You should talk, Reston," he scowled. "Where's your almighty research? Any medical journal interested in your nothing results?"

"My research hasn't harmed a colony of prairie dogs," he retorted. "I've

taken the proper precautions. Nothing's escaped from my petri dishes or centrifuges."

"Dr. Horner, where did you get the rabies serum?" I asked. His eyes slid from mine, and he cleared his throat. Reston looked at him sharply.

"Don't say it. You stole it from me?"

Horner shook his head. "Not me. I haven't been near your so-called lab." He still didn't quite meet our eyes.

"Your wife stole it for you?" I asked.

Reston jumped out of his chair and thumped the wall angrily with his fist. "Not man enough . . ." He froze and turned slowly towards the bedroom. "My God. She was injected with rabies."

"Only if you gave it to her," Horner bit out. "I was with her every time she filled the syringes. There were no accidents." He slowly came out of his chair. "Did you give it to her? An accident in your perfectly controlled lab? She assisted you often enough."

"Of course not. We always followed proper safety procedures. There were no accidents."

"Micky," Clare plucked at my arm. "Does Mrs. Horner have rabies?"

Helena chose that moment to make an entrance. "Pay attention, people. The police have arrived." She sailed out the front door. I heard the crunch of tires on the gravel driveway and was vaguely surprised at how light it still was for a day in January. We all spilled onto the porch except for Jacky Ames, who remained with her sister. Outside I could hear keening sounds from the open bedroom window. Gregory slunk to the far end of the porch with a haunted look on his face and huddled behind the scrub oak.

Robyn extracted herself from the back seat of the police car while Aunt Helena stomped down the porch steps to brief the two officers on what had transpired. Reston and Horner hurried over to give their own versions. Clare flitted distractedly between the front door and the porch steps. My cousin joined me.

"You made good time," I said.

"Halfway there I met a truck driver who let me use his CB to call the police. They picked me up on the way back. The ambulance should be here soon." She peeked into the gloom beyond the door. "How's she doing?"

"Dying," I said. In the clot of people in the yard I could hear Helena's strident voice accusing Horner of murder. I sighed.

Clare drifted towards Robyn and me. "You didn't say, dear. Does Mrs. Horner have rabies?" Robyn gave me a sharp look.

I nodded.

"Her husband gave her rabies?" Robyn looked bewildered.

I shook my head. "You should know by now that Helena is never right."

"Was it her sister?" Clare asked fearfully. "Should we have left her alone with Miss Ames?"

"Not her sister," I said, and then before she could open her mouth, "It wasn't Reston either."

"A lab accident after all?" she asked.

"No accident." The ambulance pulled up then. Clare trotted down the steps and led them into the house to where Kathryn Horner lay trussed in silk scarves. Moments later they'd restrained her in a gurney and ferried her out of the cabin. Jacky walked alongside, refusing to let go of her sister's plucking, clutching hand.

"She's getting the attention she wanted," I said softly. "But too late."

Robyn stared at me. "She infected herself?"

I nodded. "She'd lost the spotlight she craved. Her sister tuned her out years ago. Her old boyfriend, Reston, was more interested in his career and his rivalry with Horner than in her. Her husband learned also to ignore her small illnesses in favor of his research competition with Reston. So, instead of pretending to be sick, she made herself sick. And she chose the subject of both Horner's and Reston's research, rabies."

"But they didn't see her at all, did they? Too wrapped up in their old battles."

"Her extreme measures included stealing the starter motors to keep her circle of attention closed." I rubbed my neck tiredly and continued. "She chose her sickness badly. Probably wasn't aware that rabies isn't symptomatic in its early stages, which can last months. And when symptoms do appear, it's too late. There's no cure."

I stared at the ambulance as it swung out of the drive and down the highway. Reston and Horner hadn't even seen it leave. They continued to argue with each other and with Helena who still protested Horner's guilt at the top of her voice. Clare tried to quiet her with a gentle hand, but Aunt Helena shrugged her off.

"I'd better explain matters to the police," I said and started down the stairs. "Hope they don't make me write anything."

Robyn stopped me. I looked up to find her staring at me with concern. "Micky, you would never do that, would you?"

"Do what?"

"Make yourself really ill just to get attention?"

I gave her a puzzled look. "I don't know what you're talking about, cousin. Why would I need to make myself sick when I naturally get sick without any help?"

Robyn gave me a relieved smile. "That's okay then. Good for you."

Helena suddenly shouted, "Michaela, stop dithering and tell Gregory to bring my interrogation notes. At once."

I winced. "Actually, coz, I could do with a little *less* attention."

Me and China Lee

Raymond Steiber

The story of how China Lee and I got mixed up in a real-life horror movie, which even had a guy in it who looked like Boris Karloff, takes some telling. So I'd better start at the beginning and go right on through to the end. And if, when I get there, you think it's all a bunch of wind and *frijoles*, well, I guess I won't blame you.

It was 1944, and China and I had left Johnny Redmond's Hot Seven and gone to work at a little place out on Sunset. The club was too small for a regular band, so I'd put together an offbeat little trio whose chief purpose was to back China's vocals. Guitar, bass, no drums, and me playing a muted trumpet. The bass player was a sixteen-year-old kid from Pomona and therefore too young for the draft. He later played with Kenton and then ended up in the string section of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Our guitar player, James Goody, was over forty, so he didn't have to worry about the draft either. The other thing about him was that he was colored. That meant we were a mixed group which, Benny Goodman's small combos notwithstanding, was pretty unusual then. Al Musconi, who owned the place, wouldn't put a picture of the trio on the board outside. He was afraid it would scare off customers, but in the end people came in just to hear James play. Times

were changing, and Nat Cole, another L.A. musician, had already crossed the color line onto the white hit parade.

The main attraction of our group was China, whose real first name was Dorothy. She sounded like a combination of Lee Wiley and Peggy Lee and sort of looked like the old silent film actress Louise Brooks. Imagine Louise Brooks with almost Asian eyes and you just about got her.

I was making good money then. I worked radio shows during the day and was also on call at Warner's for whenever they needed a hot trumpet on a soundtrack. And five nights a week we played our gig on Sunset. And if you're wondering why I wasn't out in the Pacific with an M-1 rifle in my mitts, it was because I'd hurt my knee in an automobile accident and was 4-F.

The room on Sunset was a little more swank than we were used to, and a lot of topnotch people dropped by. Johnny Mercer came in one night with Jo Stafford and Paul Weston, and we quickly switched to a smoky head arrangement of "Laura," his latest hit. And Judy Garland stopped by with a guy who might've been Vincente Minnelli. (I always remember that because a few years later we cut a single of Judy's "Better Luck Next Time" from *Easter Parade*—just China

with James Goody's guitar in the background and me not coming in till the end.)

But I guess I'm rambling here and not getting on with the story. Still, when I think of those times, when I was young and head over heels in love with China, it's hard to switch to Dr. Karlsbad and Lola Azimuth and what they tried to do to us. And they tried to do plenty.

It started with Eddie the waiter telling me about D. W. Garfinch.

"He sat in the back of the room and nursed a drink for an hour and didn't take his eyes off China the whole time. When he left, I was out front and caught a glimpse of his car. It was this long black Packard from maybe 1932, and there was a sinister-looking Oriental chauffeur behind the wheel."

"You've been watching too many Fu Manchu serials. And who the hell's D. W. Garfinch?"

"Why, he's the movie director that practically invented this town. *Forgotten* *Forget-Me-Nots* with the great Gillian Lush as the poor orphan girl—remember that one? And what about *A Nation Divided*, his Civil War picture?"

"Isn't that the one where they made heroes of the Ku Klux Klan?"

"Yes, but he made up for it with *Men Against Infamy*, the six hour and twenty-three minute saga of man's inhumanity to man."

From this you can see that Eddie was a little nuts about the movies. He came from some jerkwater town in Georgia, and as soon as he could manage it, he'd headed west so that he could be close to the source. His

ambition was to work at the Brown Derby, where every night he'd be able to drool over all the famous movie stars and producers.

"I guess he made your night, Eddie."

"You think he wants China for a picture?"

I sort of recalled his name now. "Is he still in the game? Didn't he just do silents?"

"He made one talkie back in the early thirties. *Lincoln*—remember it?"

The bad thing was that I *did* remember it. It was the worst movie I saw as a kid, and believe me, I wasn't very choosy back then. The actors all walked around as if they'd just been shot full of novocaine, and about every five minutes Lincoln would up and say, "The Union must be preserved!" This was pretty funny, since the actor who played him had gone through five wives and when it came to preserving unions he was a no-start loser.

I told China about Garfinch as we packed up on the bandstand that night.

She narrowed her eyes. "Didn't he make that awful movie *Lincoln*? And didn't about twenty people die of boredom during a showing in Philadelphia?"

"I think it was only six. And they were all pretty old."

"If he wants me in a movie, I'm going to have to learn to slow way down."

"You're also going to have to learn how to mouth your words, since he only knows how to make silents."

That was Garfinch's first appearance at the club, but it wasn't his

last. Eddie was practically beside himself as he told us.

"He's been here *three* times this week. It's the same routine every time he comes. He sits at a back table and stares at China for an hour and then leaves in his long black Packard."

I said, "There must be something wrong with this guy."

China didn't like that. "Because he stares at me? What's wrong with that? Aren't I goodlooking enough to stare at?"

"Because he's old enough to be your grandfather."

"I *liked* my grandfather. He was sweet."

"Yeah, but did he drool over you?"

"Come to think of it, he did drool a little."

Eddie said, "I predict big things for you, Miss Lee. I predict a future *in the movies!*" And as he said it, his eyes got so big and shiny that you could almost see the stars in them.

But his cup hadn't yet runneth over because the next night Lola Azimuth showed up.

"She wants to talk to China!"

"Who wants to talk to China?" I asked.

"Lola Azimuth!"

So then I had to find out who Lola Azimuth was.

"Theda Bara, Gloria Swanson, *Lola Azimuth.*"

She was one of those silent screen sirens who hadn't crossed over into talkies. Not, Eddie assured me, because she lacked the voice but because she'd already met her career goal of marrying three millionaires in a row and parting them from half their assets. She might

have been born in some dank village in Transylvania, but she sure knew how to pad her bank account.

"She looks the same as she always did, and she must be fifty!"

China got introduced to her between sets, and I tagged along for the show. If you want to know what she looked like, picture a dark Ann Sheridan with a Central European accent. She wore a jade green dress that made her body appear soft and caressible, and the rocks on her fingers, though discreet by Hollywood standards, still would've knocked the eyes out of a maharajah.

Her companion rose to his feet. If Lola was Ann Sheridan, he was a mustached Boris Karloff. He also had a semi-military brushcut. He gave a stiff bow and took China's hand.

"Friedrich Karlsbad, at your service."

He held China's hand so long that any moment I expected him to whip out a loupe and examine it for flaws.

We all sat down, me a little uneasily because nobody had invited me.

Lola said, "I just *luf* your zinging, my dear."

Dr. Karlsbad luffed it, too. And to prove the point, he kept reaching over and patting China on the hand and forearm. Not affectionately but the way a butcher might check a cut of beef.

"You've got the most wonderful complexion," Lola said. "I positively envy you."

"It's all the cigarette smoke in these nightclubs. After awhile it sort of cures you."

A polite round of laughter that suddenly got turned off like a faucet.

Then more hand patting from Karlsbad, and this time Lola joined in as well.

I sat there like a discarded overcoat and took it all in. Lola and Karlsbad kept topping each other with compliments for China. Usually that kind of stuff's her meat and potatoes, but now she was beginning to get a funny look around the eyes—like a horse that was being gone over by a couple of horse traders.

It went on like that for awhile. Then Karlsbad took a bit of the flesh on China's forearm and rolled it between his thumb and forefinger.

"Hey, lay off!" China snapped.

She reached out and poked Karlsbad in the chest with her finger. Like my grandmother, she had a finger poke that'd lay out a regiment. And also like my grandmother, she knew where all the most tender places were on your anatomy. I wondered if that weren't one of the things that attracted me to her—that she had a no-nonsense forefinger—and I wondered what Sigmund Freud would've made of that. Plenty, I figured, and none of it complimentary.

Karlsbad went pale and sat back in his chair, and China turned her attention to Lola. Don't finger-poke her, I thought, or she'll poison us.

China said, "It's been nice, but Rich and I have to do another set."

Lola managed to get hold of China's hand one last time. "We must have lunch sometime."

China muttered something about being on a diet, and we left the table.

"Did you see the scars on her?" China asked in a stage whisper.

"What scars?"

"Around her eyes and ears and chin. She's had more plastic surgery than plastic."

Plastic surgery left scars then. I guess it still does, but they're better at hiding them.

I glanced back at their table.

"They're gone. They left already."

"Did they leave a puff of smoke behind?"

Later I thought: a good question.

The next move was D. W. Garfinch's, and it came in the form of a neat white envelope in the hand of his Oriental chauffeur. He wore a gray uniform with jodhpur-style pants and knee-high boots. He was a Tibetan, it turned out, named Lob-sang, and he couldn't speak. Garfinch not only liked silence in his movies, he appeared to value it in his employees, too.

The great man was having an intimate gathering Sunday night, and we were invited to perform. Just Mr. Hollister and Miss Lee, not the whole crew. And it was understood that there would be a gratuity.

"The guy's loaded," Eddie told us. "He put all the money he made from his movies into timber and oil and real estate."

So the gratuity ought to be a nice one—unless his mind were still set in pre-1930's dollars.

I didn't bother to take my horn on the big night. I figured Garfinch would have a piano and I could noodle around enough on that to back China's vocals. We'd been offered transportation, but I drove my 1940 LaSalle instead. I'd been taking the trolley buses a lot, and I figured I

might as well use some of the rationed gas I'd saved up.

Garfinch's mansion sat in a lonely canyon out beyond the Hollywood Hills, and it was some setup. He'd had a builder copy the design of a Roman villa from one of his pictures—*The Last Days of Pompeii*. It was kitschy as hell—a Hollywood set designer's idea of ancient opulence. You expected to see a sign: THIS WAY TO THE ROMAN ORGY.

When we finally found our way past all the columns to the front door, we were greeted by a butler—another Oriental, only this one spoke. "You must take these costumes and put them on. You can use the cloakroom."

"What is this? A fancy dress party?"

But the butler was already padding away across the gleaming black marble of the atrium.

We slipped into our costumes. They were Roman tunics and smelled of mothballs—probably leftovers from one of Garfinch's movies. They only came down to around mid-thigh—which looked fine on China but left me with my knee brace exposed.

China said, "You're not going to walk out there in your shoes and socks?"

"What do you expect me to do? Go barefoot?"

"There's Roman sandals here, too, you nitwit."

So I left my shoes and socks behind—and everything else, too, since the tunics didn't have any pockets. Where did ancient Romans carry their driver's licenses?

The butler had come back for us.

We followed him out of the atrium into what for lack of a better word I'll call the living room.

A bunch of phony Roman couches were arranged on the marble floor, and tall columns rose to an airy balcony just underneath a cupola. The balcony was lined with statues of Greek and Roman gods—or maybe they were just movie producers who had personal trainers.

But even more surprising was who was there to greet us. Garfinch, of course, in a tie and business suit, but also Dr. Karlsbad, also in a suit and tie, and in a flowing white evening gown, Lola Azimuth.

"If either of them pinches me," China muttered between her teeth, "I'm belting them."

Garfinch got to his feet. He looked like an elongated Thomas Edison. He even had the same thatch of white hair. He must've been eighty, but it was a fit eighty. You could still see him in jodhpurs with a director's megaphone in his mitt.

I expected him to greet us, but all he did was swim his eyes past our faces and focus on Lola. It was as if he didn't even want to see us.

"I'm leaving now," he said. "The cook and the butler go with me. As soon as we reach the gate, Lobsang will release the dogs, and you'll be alone. I'm going to my lodge at Lake Arrowhead. I won't be back for ten days. You'll do what you have to do and leave the place as spotless as you found it."

China said, "Hey, what is this?"

Karlsbad smirked at her. "Don't worry—just a little private performance for Lola and me."

Something was fishy. "Let's get out of here," I said.

Garfinch stayed us with a gesture—he was a director all right. Then he went on with his speech.

"I have obeyed your wishes, Lola, and got Miss Lee to come here tonight. This will be my last gift to you. I have always loved you with a dark passionate love—an all-consuming flame that could never be quenched. Yes, ever since we consummated our lust during the shooting of *Men Against Infamy*. You played a Babylonian slave girl in that picture, but in the end it was I who became the slave. But now I realize that the physical aspect of our love can never be rekindled, and I bid you a last farewell."

He spoke as if he were reading from a title card. Maybe that was the way he thought everybody spoke during great moments. Or maybe it was just the way *he* spoke, and that was why his title cards had always been so dreary.

The second he finished, his butler stepped forward, draped a black opera cape across his shoulders, and handed him a wide-brimmed hat.

He made a slow exit across the acres of black marble floor, a *really* slow exit, and we all stood, or sat, watching as if mesmerized. Then he was gone, and Karlsbad rubbed his hands together. "Good. That's over. Now we can get down to business."

China said, "We sing three numbers, and then we're gone. Where's the piano?"

"I don't think you understand the situation, my dear. There are several large dogs patrolling the grounds. No one can leave."

"Well just how many damn songs do you want us to sing?"

"You needn't sing anything. Nor will you *do* anything, since we cleverly arranged to have you dressed in pocketless tunics. No pockets, no weapons."

He was forgetting China's forefinger.

"Rich, let's call the cops."

Karlsbad rose to his feet. "Not possible, my dear."

Then Lola made sure it wasn't possible by producing an elegant little automatic pistol from her evening bag.

"What's going on here?" I demanded.

Lola raised her perfect chin. "Tell them, Friedrich."

Karlsbad smiled. He was center-stage and right in his element.

"You will observe how young and beautiful Miss Azimuth appears. She's fifty-five but could pass for thirty."

She told *you* she was fifty-five.

"I am entirely responsible. For years I experimented in my Viennese laboratory with potions and injections whose purpose was to restore youth and prevent aging. Then the war came and I had to leave."

Or the cops came and you had to leave.

"I have continued my work here in Los Angeles, and Miss Azimuth, Lola, has been my prime subject. I've injected her with the growth cells of unborn sheep. I've bathed her in the urine of virgin lambs."

"Yeah," China said.

"I've blended tender lotions of ewe's milk. And look what I've created!"

A fifty-five-year-old ex-movie star with plastic surgery scars.

"But all this has not been enough. The time has come for the ultimate experiment, and you, Miss Lee, are going to help me with it."

China said, "If you want me to tinkle in her bathwater, I got to warn you I'm not a virgin."

"Tinkle, schminkle. It's your kidneys, spleen, and liver I'm after."

That's L.A. for you. It draws every looney in the known universe and all the charlatans, too. And Karlsbad was the worst kind—the medical con man who's started believing his own spiel.

"We'll make a puree of them, then extract their golden essence and inject it under Lola's skin. Twenty injections, twenty-five, and she'll look like a nineteen-year-old."

"Just how do you think you're going to get all that stuff out of me, you fuzzwit?"

"Just how *do you* think, Miss Lee?"

Lola pointed her pistol. "And you'll lie still for every minute of it, darling."

China saw just how serious they were—and how nuts, too. And that rat Garfinch had gone along with them. He was a slave all right—a slave to a senile brain.

"Listen, I don't think you'll like what you find when you open me up. I drink gallons of booze and smoke six packs of cigarettes a day, and I live with a trumpet player who snores."

"Now wait a minute," I said.

"I get no sleep at all. I mean, outside I may look okay, but inside I'm a mess."

Karlsbad said, "You're a charming liar, Miss Lee, but I'm sure you have a delightful liver. Haven't I prodded you? Haven't I kneaded your flesh between my fingers and made sure of its elasticity? You're the perfect specimen for our experiment."

In an instant China went from scared to boiling mad. "You think so, huh? Rich, grab that carafe of water and dump it all over the floor."

"Huh?"

"It's marble. The water'll make it slippery. And we're wearing sandals we can kick off and what are they wearing?"

Leather-soled Oxfords and high heels. I dumped the water, and we took off running. Nobody fired at us.

"They can't afford to perforate my vital organs," China yelled.

"But I can perforate his!" Lola shouted.

And just to prove the point, she fired a shot that scarred the marble.

We skidded through an archway, our tunic skirts flapping in the wind. Good thing I left my shorts on, I thought.

Then we ran down a wide straight corridor. My gimpy knee hurt like hell, but I kept on chugging.

Lola snapped another shot at us. It took the nose off a bust of Julius Caesar, or maybe it was Sam Goldwyn.

"We've got to get out of this shooting gallery," I gasped.

"Here—through this archway."

The archway took us through a set of double doors and out onto the apron of a rectangular pool that must've been sixty feet long. The pool was flanked on either side by

Roman colonnades, and in the middle of it a statue of a water nymph holding a dolphin in her arms. A fountain of water sprayed out of the mouth of the dolphin. Maybe she was squeezing it too hard.

We started along one side of the pool, but just then one of those dogs Karlsbad had told us about came swooping out of the darkness at the other end. It was a huge mastiff, and it looked as terrifying as the Hound of the Baskervilles.

"Ulp!"

We made a U-turn and scrambled back into the house through a pair of windows.

We ended up in the villa's library. Row upon row of leather-bound books and scripts ascending into the darkness. Against one wall stood an elaborately carved glass-fronted wooden cabinet, and inside the cabinet were half a dozen gleaming Oscars. Such is the power of Hollywood that, despite the jam we were in, we went right over and goggled at them.

"I didn't know Garfinch won any Oscars," China said, as if that somehow exonerated him. "Look, here's one for *Forgotten Forget-Me-Nots*. Best picture, 1919. And this one's for *A Nation Divided*. Best director, 1915."

"Wait a minute. They didn't have Oscars in 1915. They only started giving them out around 1928 or '29. Garfinch had these made up on his own and awarded them to himself."

"That's sad, Rich. The guy who built Hollywood, and he never even got an Academy Award."

"What—are you feeling sorry for that rat?"

Talk about a couple of idiots. There we were arguing about Garfinch's phony Oscars, and meanwhile a pair of lunatics were hunting us down. Then we heard them out in the marble hall. Our voices must've drawn them.

China got back to business.

"We've got to finish this, Rich. Or they'll finish us."

We opened the cabinet and each grabbed an Oscar. China got *Forgotten Forget-Me-Nots*, and I got *Sins of Salome*. Then I made a stirrup out of my hands, and China put her foot in it and climbed up on top of the cabinet. It was so gloomy up there that she practically disappeared.

"Remember, Rich—you've got to lure them into range."

The door to the corridor was only a few feet away and wide open. I crouched there in the semi-darkness. Out in the corridor I heard a double dose of footsteps. Then Karlsbad was there. He had a short Roman sword in his hand, probably another one of Garfinch's leftovers. I wondered if that was how he intended to remove China's liver. He started past the door as if his attention were on something farther up the hall. I came out of my crouch, and he did a double-take worthy of Jack Oakie.

I waved the skirt of my tunic at him and yelled, "*Ya-ha! Ya-ha!*"

Then I turned and ran past the cabinet. Karlsbad charged after me with the sword. And China wound up and cracked him on the back of the head with her Oscar.

He skidded along the marble floor on his chin, and I had to skip over

him to keep from having my legs taken out from under me.

Lola Azimuth was far enough behind that she only saw the end of it. She slithered into the room and waved her bright little automatic at me.

"So, darlink! Where is the Lee woman?"

"There," I pointed.

She turned around just in time to catch *Forgotten Forget-Me-Nots* right in the kisser.

"That's the only Academy Award you'll get," China hissed as she jumped down from the cabinet.

We tore the pull ropes off the curtains and tied them up.

"That leaves only one problem, Rich. How do we get past the dogs?"

"Maybe I could throw them my knee brace and distract them."

China snapped her fingers. "That's it—feed them. Let's see if this place has a kitchen."

It had one all right, and it was big enough to serve the Waldorf. We found a freezer full of meat and thawed out an armload of steaks on the stove. Then we poked holes in the steaks and tied long pieces of string to them.

We went to the double doors that led out to the pool and began angling for Garfinch's wolfhounds. The idea was to toss out a steak and then, when a dog went for it, drag the steak back through the doors with the string. The mutt would follow it with eyes on only one thing, a juicy

hunk of rationed meat, and that's when I'd coldcock him with an Oscar.

We should've used Lola's automatic, but it had got lost somewhere in the gloom of the library. Besides, I don't think China would've stood for actually killing the dogs. A little brain damage was fine, but anything else was coldblooded murder.

It took us half the night to get all three of them. As we polished each one off, we dragged it down the hall and shut it in a separate closet. Then finally it was over.

"Let's get out of here," I said.

And that was what we did.

Eddie wanted all the details of our evening at Garfinch's. What was the inside of his fabulous Roman villa like? We clammed up, and he went off in a huff.

We spent the rest of the week worrying that Karlsbad and Azimuth would come after China again. Then we worried that they'd go after some other girl. But we never heard of them again, and neither did anybody else.

China said, "You don't think we tied the ropes too tight? I mean, a rich guy like Garfinch, he could've easily got rid of the bodies."

Or worse, I thought, what if one of the dogs got loose from his closet. And what if he—

I picked up my trumpet and quickly thought about something else.

Cabbages and Things

Marianne Strong

I found Uncle Thomas lying half-way down the cellar stairway.

Though I consider myself reasonably intelligent and level-headed, with plenty of experience in keeping calm while dealing with people of all temperaments and needs in my job as chief librarian at Pittsville Memorial Library, I did exactly what my CPR teacher told me not to do. I moved Uncle Thomas, turning him from his side onto his back, hoping to see evidence of life, like his chest rising and falling.

I was frantic because I truly love Uncle Thomas. He's funny, he's generous, he is still capable of doing beautiful work with wood, a skill he brought with him when he immigrated from Poland. Moreover, with some of the money he made laying beautiful wood floors and erecting paneled walls for the wealthy of Pittsville, he put me through college after his brother, my father, died fifteen years ago.

When I turned him over, I saw that the right side of his mouth sagged, his right arm flopped helplessly, and he couldn't talk. Recognizing the symptoms of stroke immediately, having seen them only a year ago in a colleague, I jumped up and dashed back up the steps and into the kitchen, where I called an ambulance. Then, hands shaking, I called my sister Helen to report that our beloved uncle would

be taken to Mercy Hospital and that she should meet me there. After that, I returned to Uncle Thomas and sat at his side, trying to console him and to reassure him that help was on the way.

Rather like Coleridge's ancient mariner, he kept gesturing weakly with his left hand, pointing a long skinny finger down the stairs. But I couldn't figure out what he wanted. I was too frightened and excited to see what he was pointing at. I assumed that he was trying to tell me that he'd been on his way down to the cellar to retrieve a lightbulb or get a can of green beans from the basement cooler. I assumed incorrectly. But I didn't find that out until four hours later.

That's when I returned from the hospital to Uncle Thomas's house to get him a pair of bedroom slippers and a robe. I was breathing much easier by then because the doctors had told me that I'd gotten Uncle Thomas to the hospital in time for them to give him the new stroke medicine that considerably lessened damage to the brain. And I hadn't done any damage in moving him.

I thanked all the saints in heaven for that because I couldn't bear the thought that I might have done something to paralyze him. Uncle Thomas had been so vital a part of my life, right from childhood. He

used to stash goodies for us behind a trapdoor he had built into the painted wood paneling he'd put in a basement room to convert it from a coal bin to a cooler for canned and preserved foods.

I remember how he'd created the trapdoor, using studs to leave a space of about three inches between the new paneling, painted a rich golden brown, and one of the inside coal-dust-dirty walls. He'd put the hinges on the bottom of the four-by-four-foot trapdoor and disguised them by installing a shelf along the bottom of the door.

The trapdoor opened from its top, aligned with the angle of the ceiling and wall, and was kept closed by a five inch horizontal wooden latch on its right side. Uncle Thomas ran a wire down from the left side of the latch and tucked it into the nearest corner of the cooler. Then he nailed a small shelf a few inches below the latch. With a can or two of tomatoes on the shelf, the latch was nearly invisible.

Uncle Thomas bragged that no robber would spot the trapdoor. He admonished us kids that it was a secret, and he enjoyed seeing our childish pleasure in having a secret treasure spot.

Collecting Uncle Thomas's robe and slippers for the hospital, I had tears in my eyes remembering how Helen and I used to sneak down to the cellar, remove the cans from the little shelf, stand to one side, and carefully yank the wire to release the latch and reach in for the treasures: clear toy candies in the shape of boots and horses, little carved wooden boxes so typical of

Polish woodcrafting, and even a wooden miniature of King Wladyslaw III, a handsome young king of Poland.

I was almost finished collecting Uncle Thomas's belongings when someone knocked on the door. I went down and let in Millie DeLio, the neighbor from next door.

"My dear," she said, "can I do anything to help? I just couldn't believe it when I saw the ambulance. A stroke, the hospital said when I called. Is that right?"

"They generally know best," I said, not fooled by Millie's offer. She just likes to be the first in the neighborhood to know all the news.

"Just awful. Just awful. But I *knew* it would happen," she said, pushing her blue and gold speckled glass frames higher on her nose with the tip of an index finger.

I obliged. "How?"

"All that traipsing up and down the cellar steps."

"Uncle Thomas has been up and down those steps all his life," I said defensively. "They never did him any harm before."

"Oh, but he spent more time in that cooler this last week than he has over the last two years. Pounding something. And one evening I just happened to cut through the yard. I heard what sounded like someone scraping paint or something. Sometimes the light was on until nine in the evening. The whole neighborhood figured he was building something. Or hiding something. I expect you know which." Millie paused, waiting.

"I haven't the foggiest," I said. "Do you?"

Millie apparently believed me because, looking disappointed, she let her glasses slide back down her nose. She fussed a bit more about wanting to help, offered to keep the house in shape while Thomas was in the hospital (that would give her a chance to check the cooler), and left.

I made a mental note to ask Uncle Thomas about his activities but then remembered that he couldn't talk in any coherent manner. His right hand was useless, so he'd have to write with his left hand and he probably couldn't do that very well either.

I had stuck his robe and slippers, along with his favorite pair of wooden rosaries with the beads carved into little rosettes, into an overnight bag and was prepared to leave for the hospital again when my sister came up the front porch steps. I let her in, admonishing her for leaving Uncle Thomas alone in the hospital. Ever since Aunt Nicola had died a year and a half ago, I'd worried about his being lonely. Aunt Nicola had been a beautiful woman who, at holidays, dressed in rose with a lovely necklace that held three deeply colored rubies of about a carat each. She always looked like a fairy godmother to us kids.

"Jackie, relax," Helen said. "He's asleep now. And I believe there are nurses and doctors in the hospital."

My younger sister has always been calmer than I, and a little cleverer, but she's a bit irresponsible.

"Besides," she added, "he wants something from the house. I think. He gave me this note." She thrust out a folded piece of paper.

"He trusted you with a note? Knowing how you lose everything?"

Helen stuck out her tongue.

I took the note and read it. "Booty in socs." The last word trailed off in a shaky line. Beneath it were the letters "JAC" with shaky underlining. Uncle Thomas often called me Jacs.

I looked at Helen. She shrugged. "I thought you'd know what it means."

"Well, I don't."

Helen took the note back and stared at it. "Boots," she said. "He probably wants his boots."

"Oh of course," I answered. "He wants his boots in the hospital, even though it's summer and even though he can't walk. And he wants his socks so he doesn't get charged for the ones the hospital provides."

"Well, then, what does he want?"

"I haven't got the foggiest idea."

Helen stared at the note again, pulling at a bit of her wavy blonde hair. "I've got it. 'Bobby is sauced.' That's it. Maybe Uncle Thomas had a near-death vision of Uncle Bobby drinking himself to death. He figures Uncle Bobby will end up doing that and go straight to hell for it."

Believe it or not, I actually took Helen's interpretation seriously for a minute. I knew that Uncle Thomas had recently asked Uncle Bobby, his brother, who had been a prosperous and competent jeweler for thirty years until he'd started drinking again, to reset the loose rubies in Aunt Nicola's necklace. According to Uncle Thomas, Uncle Bobby had removed the stones from their setting before he fell off the wagon and went on a binge, a week or two ago,

bragging in every bar in town that, when he got round to it, he'd do a better job of resetting those stones than Harry Winston could. But I couldn't imagine why Uncle Thomas would want to write me a message informing me that Uncle Bobby's was sauced. The whole town knew that.

"Let's go back to the hospital," I said. "When he can talk again, he'll tell us what he wants."

"It's just that he seemed so frantic to have me give you the note. As if he wanted something right away."

"Come on," I said, anxious to get back to Uncle Thomas.

"Wait a minute," Helen said, her big blue eyes narrowed into slits. "When you called, you said you'd found him on the cellar steps, right?"

I nodded, trying to hold my temper.

"Well, maybe he wants something from there. Maybe he was going down to get it when he had the stroke. Maybe he'd already gotten it and dropped it on the steps."

"Brilliant, Sherlock," I said. "But there was nothing lying on the steps."

Ignoring me, Helen went to the cellar door. She opened it, flipped on the light, and peered down the stairs. "Hmm," she said. "You're right. Nothing there."

"Can we get going?" I said.

"Wait a minute." I groaned. "The door to the cooler is still open. He must have gone in to get something to eat."

"I know," I said, gritting my teeth, "but whatever food he wanted for lunch, he can't eat it now, so let's just get to the hospital."

She went halfway down the steps, and I followed to call her back.

She had stopped halfway down and was leaning forward, craning her neck. "There's something down there," she said. "It looks like . . . like a glove. Maybe you'd better see what it is."

I plopped the overnight bag at the top of the stairs and started down. Once Helen got curious about something, she was relentless. She was also a bit of a coward. She always pushed me forward to check out whatever she wanted to know. As a kid, I'd endured many a bug bite picking up some creature Helen wanted to see close up. I'd also bitten into many an acidic plant, blistering my tongue so my little sister could know whether the plant tasted sweet or sour. But she was my little sister, and I had always looked after her and tried to keep her happy, especially after our father died and Mom's spinal arthritis hurt so badly that some days she could barely stand, let alone take care of two kids. Whatever lay in the cellar, if anything, I would make sure it posed no danger to my little sister.

I looked over her shoulder to the cooler ten feet from the bottom of the stairs. I stared. "Helen," I said finally, "that glove looks plumped out."

"Plumped out?" Helen said, her voice quivering a bit. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, it looks as if there's a hand in it."

Helen backed around me and up a few steps. "Don't try to scare me."

I wasn't sure about her, but I knew I'd scared myself plenty. I

wanted to back up and run. I looked at the glove again. It was dark brown, visible against the black cellar floor but only if one were deliberately looking at the spot where it lay. When I'd found Uncle Thomas, I'd been too excited to notice the glove, even when he had pointed to the bottom of the stairs.

Now I envisioned the cooler. Twenty years ago, back when Uncle Thomas and Aunt Nicola still had the old coal furnace, it had been a coal bin with a concrete floor. The bin had been able to hold a ton of coal, so it was large. Maybe fifteen feet by fifteen feet. Large enough to accommodate a body stretched back from the glove.

"What are you going to do?" Helen's voice came from about ten feet away in the direction of the back door.

"I'm going down to look."

I screwed up my courage. After all, maybe the glove just had air in it, or just looked plumped up from here. "Stay up here, Helen."

"Okay."

"Near the telephone," I said. "Not the door. I might need you to call for help."

Helen didn't move. I sighed and started down the stairs again.

Despite the ballerina light steps I took, the stairs creaked beneath my feet. I kept my eyes on the glove. If it made one move, a flinch, a jerk, a wave, I'd be up the stairs in a flash.

Nothing moved.

The closer I got, the more the glove looked occupied by something. I started to have difficulty swallowing and even more difficulty believing the voice in my head that

kept saying this couldn't be happening.

I stopped at the bottom of the stairs, took a deep breath, and moved to the right so I could get a better view of the entrance to the cooler, which opened from the left side of that part of the cellar.

I emitted a sickly squeak when I saw a wrist extending from the glove. Then I noticed something that made my stomach turn, something I couldn't see from the top of the stairs. A trickle of something wet had leaked from the cooler onto the black cellar floor. It glistened. Blood, I thought. Oh my God, blood. Somebody was hurt. Or dead.

I raced to the cooler, yelling back to Helen. "Helen, call an ambulance."

At the door I lurched to a stop and stared down at the body of a man, motionless and stretched back into the cooler, angled toward the left wall. His left hand lay at his side. It too was gloved. He lay facedown, and I couldn't see the color of his hair because his head was covered with a ski mask.

"Helen, call the police. Tell them there's a man down here. I think he's a thief."

Helen screamed. "Then get out of there."

"He's dead. I think."

I heard Helen's footsteps thud to the phone. I dropped to my knees and reached out to check the man's carotid pulse. I'm no nurse, but because I did have a CPR course, I felt obligated to help if I could. Fortunately, I was pretty sure I wouldn't have to administer CPR because he looked quite dead.

I touched his neck.

He groaned.

I yelped and yanked away my arm.

"Jackie!" Helen shouted. "Jackie!"

"I'm all right," I yelled. "But he's alive. Call an ambulance. Then come down." Even if the man were a thief whose break-in had given Uncle Thomas a stroke, I couldn't just leave an injured man in the cellar by himself.

"I'd better wait for the police on the porch," Helen called out.

Futilely I threw my little sister a dirty look. I rose and leaned against the door jamb and waited, poised to run faster than Helen if I had to.

The police and the ambulance arrived within ten minutes. They called for the medical examiner, a fingerprint man, and a photographer, and took my statement. By the time I'd finished, the ambulance had taken the man to the hospital. The police had me check the house for anything missing, then pointed out a dimly visible circle maybe ten inches in diameter that had been covered by the lower part of his body.

"Looks like the victim fell down on that circle, then crawled toward the door." One of the policemen knelt and touched the circle. "Looks like it was scraped into the concrete with a screwdriver or a chisel or something. Just enough to make it visible if you knew it was there." He looked up at me. "Any idea what that circle is for?"

"Not the foggiest," I said for the third time that day. "I've never seen it before."

After the police left, I took two as-

pirin. I wanted a good stiff drink instead of two aspirin, but I also wanted my head clear so I could try to communicate with Uncle Thomas.

At the hospital the doctors didn't want him disturbed, so I had to wait another day to talk to him. By that time he was out of danger of having another stroke, and his eyes were bright blue again. But he still couldn't talk or write with any legibility, so I resorted to guessing games that had his roommate staring, apparently partly in curiosity and partly in alarm.

When I asked Uncle Thomas how he felt, he nodded and gave me a little smile. Then he lifted a shaky left hand to his throat and tapped it.

"Are you thirsty?" I asked.

Uncle Thomas shook his head.

"Are you hungry?"

He shook his head and rolled his eyes. For a minute I thought he was having another stroke. He moved his hand back and forth, gesturing that I was misunderstanding him.

"Oh," I said, "you're telling me your throat hurts. Please don't worry, Uncle Thomas. The doctor says you'll get therapy. You'll be able to talk again before long, and you'll be able to swallow. The stroke paralyzed your throat muscles . . ." I stopped because he was frowning at me as if I were just about the most moronic niece he had.

I racked my brain, regretting I'd never joined in the family games of charades. Uncle Thomas lifted his hand to his mouth. "But you said—er, indicated—that you're not hungry. I don't understand."

Uncle Thomas pointed a finger at me, then made the eating gestures again.

I stared in dismay. He seemed to be increasingly agitated, but I hadn't a clue to his meaning.

"Maybe he wants to know if *you're* hungry," a voice from the next bed suggested.

I looked at Uncle Thomas's roommate. About Thomas's age, the silver-haired man looked amused.

"I don't think so," I said. "Why would he want to know that?"

"Kennedy," the man said. "My name's Michael Kennedy. Yesterday when I was brought to the hospital and my wife sat here for a couple of hours, I got concerned that she hadn't eaten. Your uncle might have the same concern."

"But . . ." I stopped, having noticed that Uncle Thomas was nodding his head to indicate that Mr. Kennedy was right.

I was deeply touched. Here was Uncle Thomas having just had a stroke and all he was concerned about was whether or not I'd had any lunch. "Oh, Uncle Thomas," I said. "Don't worry about me. I'll get some food later."

Thomas made the eating gestures again and then pointed to the floor.

For a minute I thought he was trying to tell me that he'd dropped some food on the floor. I was about to smirk at Mr. Kennedy to indicate that I wasn't as dumb as I seemed when I remembered that Uncle Thomas hadn't been given anything to eat and wouldn't be given anything but liquids for another twenty-four hours or until the doctors

were sure his throat muscles were working properly.

Uncle Thomas was still pointing down and making the eating gestures.

As I was beginning to get really frustrated, I decided on a new tactic. I took a pencil and a notepad to him. He laboriously wrote something and handed it back to me.

The message read "cooler," except that the "l" looked like a capital "T" and the first "o" like an "a." "Cooler?" I asked.

Uncle Thomas's eyes brightened like a schoolteacher's whose worst student just realized that five and three made eight. He nodded, pointed at me, and made more eating gestures.

"You want me to help myself to some of the food in the cooler?"

Uncle Thomas looked ecstatic. He nodded, damned vigorously for a man who'd had a stroke the day before.

I leaned over and kissed him. "That's so lovely, Uncle Thomas. I'll do that."

Uncle Thomas reached for the notepad. He scratched out a word and handed it to me.

"Socs," I read aloud. "Do you want socks?"

Uncle Thomas moaned. Mr. Kennedy chuckled. I was inclined to hurl a glass of water at him but thought better of it. The nurses wouldn't understand.

I looked at the word again and remembered the first rule of understanding any communication: put it in context.

I leaned over to Uncle Thomas. "Do you mean sauce? Do you want

me to take some of your cucumber and cabbage sauce?"

Uncle Thomas nodded, beaming at me as if he'd known all the time that if only I were treated with patience and understanding I would be able to learn a little bit. He picked up both hands and moved them back and forth toward each other.

"A lot? You want me to take a lot?"

He beamed again.

I admit that I was feeling pretty proud of myself. Maybe I'd join in this Christmas when the family played charades. I was feeling so proud that I wanted to try figuring out what Uncle Thomas had meant by the first part of his note concerning boots, but I didn't want to press my luck.

The nurse came in and looked at her watch. Visiting hours were almost over.

"I'll be leaving soon," I said. "I just need a little bit more time." I turned to Uncle Thomas. "Can you try to tell me what happened in the cooler? Why was the man in the ski mask there?" This time I rolled my eyes and chuckled before Mr. Kennedy could. "Let me rephrase that. Was the man in the ski mask there to rob you?"

Uncle Thomas nodded vigorously.

"And were you able to hit him on the head with something?"

Thomas nodded. He lifted his left hand and swung it back and forth.

I glanced at Mr. Kennedy, then looked back at Uncle Thomas. "Did you hit him with a bottle?"

Uncle Thomas shook his head.

"A pipe?"

No again.

"A boot," I pronounced, remembering the note and feeling brilliant.

Kennedy chuckled, and Uncle Thomas moaned.

I'd had enough. Besides, this was the job of the police, not me. I kissed Uncle Thomas on the forehead and headed for the door.

"Hope you enjoyed that," I said to Mr. Kennedy as I walked past his bed.

"Very much," he said. "Let me know if you figure out what your uncle used to bash the robber."

I resisted sticking my tongue out and managed a goodbye wave instead.

All the way home I went over and over the items in the cooler: cans of beans, cans of tomatoes, jars of Uncle Thomas's locally famous cucumber and cabbage sauce, a couple of boxes of Aunt Nicola's recipes, and several old lawn chairs stacked up against a wall. I couldn't think why the robber was in the cooler or what he wanted to steal, let alone what Uncle Thomas could have wielded as a weapon. I hoped the police could figure it out.

But the police had no idea either. They returned to Uncle Thomas's house about four the next day, having asked me to meet them there. I called Helen to join me and packed an overnight bag. I wanted to stay at Uncle Thomas's house that night. I wasn't sure why, but some barely audible voice in the back of my head kept insisting that he wanted me to do something more than eat his sauce. I just couldn't figure out what. But I thought that if Helen and I

stayed overnight and just sort of meandered about the house, something would come to us.

The police had identified the robber. He was the nephew of a woman who lived five houses up from Uncle Thomas. He'd been staying with his aunt for about two months now, after having finished a jail sentence for armed robbery in Baltimore. The police figured he was responsible for several robberies in the neighborhood over the last few weeks.

"He hasn't regained consciousness," Sergeant Collins told Helen and me. "But the doctors say he will. They don't know how much he'll remember. He received a pretty good knock on the head. Lucky he wasn't killed."

"Lucky for whom?" I asked.

The sergeant smiled. "For the Harrisburg police, I guess. They want him for armed robbery, too."

"What was he hit with?"

Sergeant Collins sighed. "Doctor couldn't tell. Something with brown paint and some metal, tin if the lab reports are correct. Minute traces of paint and tin were found on the ski mask."

"Paint and tin," Helen repeated. She frowned, deep in thought. "You mean like maybe a used paint roller or roller pan?"

I grimaced at her. "What are you talking about? Uncle Thomas never kept any kind of painting equipment in here."

Helen shrugged. "Okay, what else has paint and metal?"

I looked at the sergeant.

He shrugged, too. "We're hoping your uncle can tell us."

"Good luck," I said.

"We're also hoping either you or he can tell us what the robber was after in the cooler."

I shook my head. I couldn't think of anything valuable in the cooler. Surely Uncle Thomas's sauce recipe was not that valuable. Would some famous New York restaurant hire a basically incompetent thief to steal a recipe from an old man? I didn't think so.

"Can you shed any light on the circle on the floor?"

I lifted my hands in a gesture of futility and shook my head.

Sergeant Collins sighed. "We'll just have to wait until your uncle regains his speech."

He took his leave, and Helen and I headed upstairs to choose our bedrooms. Helen mumbled all the way up the stairs, "Paint and metal, paint and metal." She was a crossword puzzle addict, so I suspected she'd spend the entire evening trying to figure out what Uncle Thomas had used.

Sure enough, she was still mumbling when she came down for supper. I'd gone down to the cooler to get some cabbage and cucumber sauce. Helen loves it. So do I. It's piquant, turning mundane cabbage or cucumbers into a tasty side dish.

Back upstairs, I'd put the jar of sauce on the kitchen table along with some cucumbers and cabbage I'd just shredded and the ingredients to make more sauce. I'd found only three jars of it, as short a supply as I'd ever known Uncle Thomas to have. He must have been busy just as Millie DeLio had said, too busy, uncharacteristically, to make

his usual supply. Since Christmas would be here by the time he got home from the physical therapy institute where he'd have to go for rehabilitation, he'd want plenty of sauce on hand. He gave it as gifts to his favorite people for their wigilia, the traditional Polish Christmas Eve supper. I couldn't let him down. I'd have to make more sauce.

I was about ready to dice the tomatoes and onions into small bits and add them to the basic ingredients: vinegar, peanut oil, and sugar.

I'd brought up a can of tomatoes from the cooler, and Helen picked it up. "No fresh tomatoes?" she asked. She liked lots of diced tomatoes in the sauce, particularly fresh ones.

"Only one. That's all Uncle Thomas had in his refrigerator," I said. "I didn't have time to go grocery shopping. I spent yesterday finding and sending bodies to the hospital. It's time-consuming. Perhaps you'd like to go to the store while I make the sauce?" I asked in full knowledge that she'd refuse. She'd sooner climb Mount Everest, without supplementary oxygen, than go grocery shopping.

I looked up from dicing the lone tomato into little red pieces. I'd expected an immediate refusal and hadn't gotten one. Helen must be sick.

She was staring at the can of tomatoes.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"Where did you get this can?"

"From the cooler. It was lying on the floor. I told you I didn't go grocery shopping. I suggest that . . ." I stopped. Her eyes were like big blue dinner plates.

"I'll bet this is it," she trumpeted.

"Is what?"

"The weapon. Uncle Thomas's weapon, of course."

"Of course?" I knew I sounded impossibly dumb, but I was getting used to that.

"Naturally. Look, suppose the thief broke into the house knowing that Uncle Thomas was old and alone. An easy target."

"Robber," I said. "It's theft if no one is home, robbery if someone is."

"Okay. Let's say the robber broke in. Uncle Thomas lures him down to the cooler with some tale of money hidden there. When they get to the cooler, Uncle Thomas grabs the closest thing at hand to bean the robber, right?"

"Yeah, okay, smarty, but what makes you think this particular can of tomatoes did the job?"

Helen pointed to its edge. "See? Cans are tin-plated."

I did see. The can had a nice dent in the top rim. "But," I sputtered, "how would old Uncle Thomas have the strength to deal a strong blow with a can of tomatoes? That's impossible."

She looked deflated.

"Besides," I said, "the sergeant said the weapon left paint and tin fragments. So where did the paint come from? Unless," I sneered, "the robber, stunned by the lethal tomatoes, flew back against the wall."

I stared at Helen, knowing that my eyes were as big as hers. We'd both gotten it at the same time. Helen dropped the can on the table, ignoring it as it rolled ominously toward the edge, and dashed for the cooler door. I followed her, only half

wondering where the can of tomatoes, rolling noisily across the kitchen floor, would come to a halt.

At the cooler I stepped inside and reached for the chain to turn on the light. Helen scooted round me, stared at the left-hand wall, and lifted an arm to point. I saw immediately how Uncle Thomas had bashed the robber. All he'd had to do was to pull the wire rigged to the wooden latch on the trapdoor built into the wall behind me. The wire would lift the latch, and the trapdoor would crack down on the robber's head.

Helen crowed triumphantly, "Here it is, just like when we were kids." She pulled up the end of the brown wire, the same color as the wall. "Shall I do it?"

"Go right ahead," I said. When we were kids, I'd always been the one to claim the excitement of opening the trapdoor. It was time Helen had her chance.

"Okay," she said. "But you'd better watch out, big sister. Your memory is failing you in your old age."

"Old age!" I shouted. "Just for that I'm not putting *any* tomato in the sauce."

She grinned. "You won't be able to if you stand there." She pointed at the floor.

I was standing smack in the middle of the circle on the floor. I jumped two feet.

Helen laughed. "Clever Uncle Thomas. He scraped out that circle just in front of the trapdoor to make sure he'd get the robber to stand in the right spot, just like you did. He gets the poor sucker to follow him into the cooler, then instructs him

to pull the light chain. The guy would have stepped over to do it just to make sure he could see what Uncle Thomas was doing. But Uncle Thomas pulled the latch and put the guy's lights out." She laughed wickedly. "All the creep saw was stars when the door smacked him." She pulled the wire.

The trapdoor banged down. A can of cleanser on a nearby shelf tipped over, rolled off its shelf, and dropped to the floor.

Helen clapped with joy.

"That's the answer to the tin traces," she said. "Just as I thought. The can of tomatoes got thrown off the little trapdoor shelf and gave the robber the preliminary knock on his head; then the door hit him. Uncle Thomas reclosed the door and started back upstairs to call the police."

I was a little appalled at the pleasure my little sister was taking in all this violence, but I also couldn't help glowing with pride at Uncle Thomas's ingenuity and Helen's cleverness in figuring it all out.

"That's great," I said. "Still, we don't know what brought the robber down here, or what Uncle Thomas was doing down here over the last week."

"Making sure that the trapdoor worked, of course, creating the circle, and carrying out any necessary repairs, like replacing the old wire," Helen said, fingering the wire.

"But what for? To catch a thief?"

"No," she said, going over to the trapdoor. "To hide something." She reached into the space behind the trapdoor. "Help me."

I peered into the space where she had put her hand. I could see some-

thing hanging from a nail in the side of a stud. It gleamed.

Helen tugged at it. "It's hooked round the nail."

"Can you get it?"

"Of course I can."

She grunted, the task proving a little harder than she, with her eternal optimism, had anticipated.

"Got it," she said.

"What? *What?*" I said. I was pretty sure I knew what Uncle Thomas had stashed in the cubbyhole, but I wanted to see it with my own eyes.

She thrust her hand out for me to see.

Gold gleamed beneath the ceiling light. A gold necklace. Aunt Nicola's necklace, her golden necklace, as shiny and intricate as always. As beautiful as always except for one thing. The three rubies were missing.

"Damnation," Helen said. "The rubies. The damned robber must have stolen them."

"But he couldn't have," I said. "He never got out of this cooler. If he had had the jewels, the police would have told us. Besides, Uncle Bobby took the rubies out week before last. He may still have them."

"Don't be silly," Helen said. "Uncle Thomas would know enough to retrieve them when Uncle Bobby went on his binge and blabbed all over town that he was fixing the necklace." She frowned. "But if the robber didn't get them, where the hell is the loot?"

I stared at her. "What did you say?"

Helen glared. "What's the matter with you? I said . . ."

"I heard what you said. You said loot. Loot."

"You okay, Jackie?"

"I'm just fine. Moreover, so is Millie DeLio. And so are you, my dearest. Thank God you like tomatoes diced into little red pieces."

"Jacs," Helen said, looking very concerned, "it's been a couple of tough days for you. I'll get you up to bed."

"Not before we find them. They're here, Helen. The rubies. Uncle Bobby removed them from their setting and, as you said, blabbed about it all over town. So Uncle Thomas hid them in this cooler where he knew he could defend himself and the rubies from any robber. And I think I know where he hid them."

"Where?"

"Booty in socs," I said.

Helen looked at me as if she feared I'd gone mad.

"Loot in sauce," I said.

"Loot in sauce?" she repeated.

"Yes," I said. "Uncle Thomas didn't want to write 'rubies' and risk revealing their hiding place, in case you lost the note. You always lose things, you know."

I looked at the two remaining jars of sauce. "Eeny, meeny," I said and picked up one. I turned it upside-down and watched the tiny red pieces ooze through the sauce to the top of the jar. Even through the sauce, they flashed a lovely ruby red.

I turned to Helen. "We'll go to the hospital first thing tomorrow," I said, "to tell Uncle Thomas we have his 'booty in socs.'"

Uncle Thomas was sitting up

when we got there. I grabbed the notebook from the table at his bedside, wrote, "We have your booty in socs—from the cooler," and handed the note to him.

He read it and looked from Helen to me. "Wanted necklace fixed for surprise," he said, pointing from

Helen to me and back. "For you two. For Christmas. You share? All right?"

Helen hugged him from one side and I from the other.

"All right," I said. "And if you can talk already, you'll be all right, too."

Uncle Thomas beamed.

SOLUTION TO THE JUNE "UNSOLVED":

Bugsy and Clara O'Toole were murdered, most probably by Dick and Betty Kibble, the couple aboard the plane for Germany.

DEPART	HUSBAND AND WIFE	DESTINATION
1	Chuck and Alice Lemoine	Japan
2	Alfie and Ellen Malvasi	Hawaii
3	Eddie and Doris Nabors	Ireland
4	Dick and Betty Kibble	Germany
X	Bugsy and Clara O'Toole	France

Don't Hold Your Breath

John H. Dirckx

“I was expecting somebody a lot older,” purred Orrin Jaggard with an ingratiating simper. It was his standard opening on meeting a woman—any woman—in the line of business. Like most cheap crooks, he wasn’t even clever enough to gauge his own lack of cleverness.

Reeta Longcamp looked up from the business card in her hand and appraised her caller with a glance. Nice hair, nice teeth, square features, well-dressed—but those eyes! Brazen and shifty, the eyes of a born confidence man. She knew the type well, having been married to a textbook example for seven years.

“I wonder if you’ve had a chance to look over the materials I faxed you last week, Reeta? Okay if I call you Reeta?”

“I went over them yesterday,” she said with a vague nod, which Jaggard took for approval of his liberty.

“Of course,” he said, “that was just the bare bones. I’ve worked up some samples specifically designed for Fidelis that I’d like you to see.” Putting his briefcase on the corner of her desk, he began pulling out specimen forms.

For a while he babbled technicalities, juggled papers, and mouthed thinly veiled flatteries. He finished up his sales pitch by expressing the conviction that his firm could surpass the services of Fidelis’s cur-

rent software and forms consultants at a fraction of the current cost.

“This all looks pretty good,” conceded Reeta, “but I’ll need to run it by some of our accounting people here.”

Jaggard feigned surprise. “I understood you were in a position to make the final decision on this.”

“The final decision, yes,” said Reeta. “I’m the business manager, but I’ll have to go by what our technical people think.”

“Well, let’s call them in, by all means.” He consulted his watch. “I’ve got till eleven. Better yet, let’s boot up our master program on your PC here and see what—”

“We’re not quite to that stage yet,” said Reeta. Wouldn’t you just love, she thought, to get your grubby little hands on some of our files?

She gathered up Jaggard’s fancily bound prospectus and sheaf of sample forms from her desk. “If you wouldn’t mind waiting just a few minutes, I’d like to show this to our comptroller and our internal auditor. You can have a seat right through there. There are magazines, and Cheryl has coffee.”

Orrin Jaggard acquiesced in this plan with a gracious sweep of the arms, retrieved his briefcase, and returned to the reception area. The receptionist was away from her desk, so he helped himself to coffee

and sat down to turn through the first of several slick magazines.

He looked at his watch for the fifth time as he put down the last magazine. It had been nearly an hour since Reeta Longcamp had vanished through a door marked PRIVATE. The coffee at the bottom of his Styrofoam cup was cold and bitter. Not only had the receptionist never come back to her desk, but the building suddenly seemed as deserted as a schoolhouse in July. How long had it been since he'd heard any of those miscellaneous and indefinable noises that signify the proximity of other human beings?

Briefcase in hand, he strolled tentatively along a corridor that led between two rows of work cubicles, each of them equipped with a computer terminal and all of them deserted. Was it a general strike or just a general coffee break? He prowled farther and, finding a row of private offices open and empty, ventured to ask, with raised voice, if anybody was around. He got no answer.

Coming to a side exit at the end of the corridor, he stepped out of the building to reconnoiter. The door closed and locked behind him just before he saw the two police cars with flashing lights at the entrance to the parking lot. He panicked, not without good reason.

How could they possibly have got onto him so fast? Reeta must have found out something last week, and set him up for a trap. For all his effrontery Jaggard was basically a coward, and his first instinct was to run.

He was in a narrow driveway

that sloped downward to a paved court, below grade, at the back of the building. To go toward the front of the building and the street would be to walk right into the waiting arms of the police. He went back and down, pretty sure he hadn't been seen, and found himself in a deep walled enclosure from which the only possible escape was by reentering the building.

When Nick Stamaty of the corner's office arrived at the building occupied by Fidelis Financial Associates around eleven thirty that morning, it looked like the scene of a major disaster. Five police cars, two firetrucks, an ambulance, and a repair truck from the gas and electric company were parked at angles, their lights flashing frantically in various colors. Traffic was blocked literally to the horizons.

As he got closer, the scene grew even more picturesque. A broad area was cordoned off with yellow plastic tape. Firemen in helmets, rubber coats, and masks were promenading officiously around the building, air tanks strapped to their backs. Two were just unmounting a huge electric exhaust fan from in front of a plate glass window that had succumbed earlier to a fire axe or a sledge hammer.

The sidewalks were thronged with onlookers, oblivious of the sharp October wind and occasional splashes of rain. No doubt some of these people worked at Fidelis and had been evacuated from the building. A large crowd of children, probably on their noon recess, were watching from the playground of

the elementary school next door. Long before Stamaty had maneuvered his white van through the muddle by flashing a red light of his own, he noticed the distinctive smell of gas in the air.

Catching sight of a police lieutenant he knew sitting in a cruiser, Stamaty got his field kit and camera from the back of the van and headed for the cruiser.

"You in charge here, Burl?"

Burl Yorke scowled and swore. "If I were in charge, most of those baboons would be on their way back to their cages by now." He climbed out of the cruiser and threw away a sodden cigar butt. "You get the story on this yet?"

"All I heard was that somebody reported a gas leak in the building around ten o'clock, and when the rescue squad got here, they found a body in the basement."

"That's right. The paramedics tried to resuscitate him, but he had no pulse and a flat line on the monitor."

"Adult male?"

"Name of Orrin Jaggard. Their internal security guy here, LeBorgh, has his I.D."

A sudden flurry of shouting and concerted activity among the rescue officials and bystanders indicated that somebody had just given the all-clear. Yorke marched off to round up his men and left Stamaty to fend for himself.

Even with all the windows and doors of the building propped open, the smell of gas inside was pungent and almost nauseating. In the lobby a man in a dark blue outfit that discreetly combined elements

of a business suit and a uniform was slumped in silent reverie behind a little desk. A photo I.D. clipped to his lapel identified him as Kent LeBorgh, director of security. Stamaty showed his own I.D.

On the desk in front of LeBorgh lay the dead man's briefcase and a plastic bag containing his other personal effects. The briefcase, which was unlocked, contained only a few miscellaneous business papers and a couple of spare pens. Its fine leather skin had been freshly gashed at one end. As Stamaty sifted through the contents of the plastic bag, which included a wallet, a set of car keys, and an expensive wristwatch, he inspected LeBorgh out of the corner of his eye.

"You gonna make it, pal?" he asked with his own gritty brand of sympathy, born of long years interviewing next of kin.

The security man was obviously badly shaken, his face a sickly ivory color with big drops of sweat standing on his forehead and around his mouth.

"I'm not so sure. A thing like this is a little out of my line, if you know what I mean. The security around here is mostly electronic."

"I notice you're not armed. Is there a lot of money on the premises?"

"You mean cash? Lord, no. Nobody handles any cash here. But they've got records, computer tapes, contracts, certificates, transfers—stuff that can be turned into cash by somebody who knows the ropes."

"Want to tell me what happened this morning? Just the high spots."

"I was in my office, right through there, around ten o'clock when one

of the secretaries phoned to say there was a strong smell of gas coming through the ventilation system. About that time I started smelling it myself. I called Fire and Rescue, per standard protocol. They said to get everybody out fast and they'd call the gas company. I went up and down the halls telling everybody to evacuate the building, but by that time the smell was so strong people were taking off on their own."

"I get the idea this Jaggard didn't work here."

"That's right, he didn't. Manufacturer's rep, I think, for a computer outfit. He had an appointment with the business manager, Ms. Longcamp."

"So what was he doing in the basement?"

"That's what we'd all like to know," said a feminine voice behind him. Turning, Stamaty found a dark, slim woman almost at his heels. "I'm Reeta Longcamp," she said, tendering a hand.

"Nick Stamaty, coroner's office. Was Jaggard with you when the gas leak happened?"

"No. When I last saw Mr. Jaggard, he was waiting in the reception area. I left him there while I took a prospectus he'd brought in to show it to some of our people. When we smelled gas and heard Mr. LeBorgh calling for everybody to get out of the building, I just assumed Mr. Jaggard would hear him and get out, too."

"Was he somebody you've had dealings with before?"

"No, this was the first time we'd met. He had some ideas on how we could streamline some of our com-

puter operations, compress our electronic records. I have one of his business cards in my office . . ."

"Thanks, I've got a whole stack of them here," said Stamaty, holding up the plastic bag in his hand. "How do I get to the basement?"

"Actually, the body's outside," said LeBorgh. "Take that side exit right behind you and follow the sloping driveway down along the side of the building."

Stamaty found a very young patrolman standing guard over the body, which lay under a blue plastic sheet in the sunken driveway just outside a heavy steel door with a shattered window. He set down his research case and pulled the sheet back. In death, Orrin Jaggard's handsome, aquiline features were the color of pie dough. The paramedics had shredded his silk shirt to stick monitor pads on his chest.

After shooting three or four flash pictures of the body as it lay, Stamaty put on rubber gloves and began a superficial examination. The police officer stood idly by, sucking in the fresh outdoor air through his nose and acting as if he encountered dozens of corpses every day.

"Was the ambulance crew still here when you arrived?" Stamaty asked him.

"Yes, sir. Problem?"

"Grab a pair of gloves out of that case. I want you to feel something."

Lieutenant Savage stopped in the doorway of Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn's office. "What did you do, Cy?" he asked. "Stop taking your medicine again?"

Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn quit beating his fist against the overhead light fixture, let the panel of textured ceiling material drop back into place, and stepped down from his desk chair with an air of ruffled dignity. "I was trying to figure out why that fluorescent light keeps humming."

"Because it doesn't know the words?" said Savage, who was full of unexpected witticisms gleaned from the conversation of his teenage daughter. "Had your lunch yet?"

"Are you about to offer to take me out to Caserta's?"

"No, I'm about to send you to check on a probable homicide."

"Then I've had lunch. Who probably got killed?"

"Two-bit con man named Orrin Jaggard. White, thirty-three, divorced. Know him?"

"Don't think so. What's his con?"

"You name it. He was the kind of guy Matt Morsch used to say lived on a 'fixed income.' Sat up nights trying to figure out ways of getting around the laws against electronic fraud."

"What happened to him?"

"Did you hear about the gas leak up on Case Avenue this morning?"

"Sure. Is that what Jaggard died of?"

"Not exactly. They thought so at first, but Stamaty says the back of the guy's head is cracked like an eggshell. The body's on the way to the morgue now. It looks like somebody decked Jaggard and left him there in the gas to suffocate. But it's possible the paramedics caused the injury, moving the body out of the building into the air."

"Must be the same crew that backed an ambulance over those two kids."

"That's a myth," snorted Savage. "Besides, it was three kids, and only one of them died."

By the time Auburn reached Case Avenue the commotion was over and the neighborhood had settled down to its usual quiet routine. Traffic was moving smoothly. The school playground was deserted now, its dinosaur of green PVC pipe looming gauntly above the tanbark chips, waiting for the dismissal bell to ring. A cruiser and a fire inspector's car parked on the sidewalk in front of Fidelis Financial Associates were all that remained to show that anything out of the ordinary had happened there that day.

The building occupied by Fidelis was three stories high, with strong vertical mullions of weather-dulled aluminum between alternating sheets of tinted plate glass and panels of something that looked like a gravel driveway stood on edge. In spite of the breezy fall weather, the front door was propped open. And in spite of that, the air in the lobby was rank with the poisonous stench of gas.

Auburn met the fire inspector on his way out.

"Got a light, Mr. Subirana?"

The inspector was a hard-headed martinet who took everything too literally. "All clear, sergeant. No danger of asphyxiation or explosion."

"You could have fooled me. The smell is already starting to curl my hair."

Subirana looked quickly at his

clipboard, acutely conscious that he was talking to an African-American and fearful of committing a faux pas. "Gas is odorless, sergeant," he said. "What you smell is mercaptan. It's added to the gas so that leaks will be detected immediately."

"Any idea how this leak got started?"

"Loose coupling on the gas supply line leading into a furnace. Apparently happened during a routine maintenance check yesterday. The man who did the check swears he didn't touch the line, but it certainly didn't loosen itself."

"Is there any chance that somebody deliberately loosened it this morning?"

"Sure, there's a chance, but why would anybody do that? They could have got their head blown off."

Lieutenant Burl Yorke wandered into the lobby from a side corridor, trailing rancid cigar smoke. "The body's gone, Cy," he said with a mournful shake of his head. "The only stiffs left around here are alive."

The two conferred briefly, with Subirana listening in. Yorke's investigations had revealed that Orrin Jaggard had visited the Fidelis offices on business that morning, and that for reasons unknown he had wandered into the basement around the time the gas leak was first noticed. No one had seen him go down there, but after the utility company had turned off the gas line into the building and the rescue squad had gone in wearing air masks, they had found him dead in the furnace room, not ten feet from where the leak had occurred.

"Doesn't it look like he's the one

who loosened the coupling?" Auburn asked Subirana.

The fire inspector's brow wrinkled. "That's too easy. Blaming somebody who's dead and can't defend himself. That's too easy."

"This particular somebody had done time for electronic fraud," remarked Auburn.

"According to Stamaty from the coroner's office," said Lieutenant Yorke, "Jaggard's death was a homicide, due to a blow to the head."

"So I heard," said Auburn. "I wouldn't admit it to his face, but if Stamaty said the guy was drowned in whale blubber, I'd believe him."

After Yorke and Subirana had gone off to work on their reports, Auburn found his way to Reeta Longcamp's office. The door was open, and so were both windows. Ms. Longcamp was conferring with two male colleagues across a desk the size of Auburn's back porch. As soon as he identified himself, she sent them away, invited him to take one of the seats just vacated, and closed the door. "Is it my imagination," she asked, "or is the smell getting stronger out there?"

"I just got here myself," said Auburn, "but if it were any stronger, I think I would have stayed outside. I understand the smell is just a harmless chemical they add to the gas to make leaks more obvious."

In both dress and manner Ms. Longcamp seemed to have achieved the perfect balance between the formal and the feminine. Her face, pleasant enough to look at, gave away nothing, and Auburn had a feeling that when it came to business she was as hard as nails.

She was the business manager and one of three vice-presidents of Fidelis Financial Associates. The CEO, E. Wayne "Jack" Frost, conducted quarterly board meetings but had no role in the daily operation of the company and in fact had been out of the country for several weeks.

"What does your firm do, exactly?" he asked.

"Fidelis is a broadly diversified financial cooperative," she said, probably quoting some promotional brochure. "We do brokerage, custom portfolios, trusts, foundation management, loans, mortgages, insurance—a little bit of everything that has to do with money."

The firm employed thirty-two people on-site, she told him. All of them had been at work that morning, and all of them had been accounted for after the gas leak.

"But most are gone now. We've pretty much shut down for the rest of the day because of the smell. I gather you're here to talk about the man who died rather than about the gas?"

"That's correct. I believe you saw him by appointment this morning?"

"At nine. He was trying to interest us in some new software programs and printed forms to go with them. We'd never met before, but I talked to him on the phone one day last week and he faxed me some materials." She handed him a business card. He laid it on the corner of the desk next to the three by five inch file card on which he'd entered her name and title.

"Had you ever heard of this company before? Or of Jaggard?"

"No, I'm pretty sure I hadn't."

"Did you do any kind of background check on him or his company?"

"Oh no. We hadn't gotten to that stage yet. He was just one of dozens of prospective vendors we talk to on a continuing basis. Actually we end up doing business with very few of them."

For the moment, Auburn elected not to tell her that Jaggard was as crooked as a corkscrew. "How did he come to be in the basement?"

"That's what everybody keeps asking me," she said. "I have no idea what he was doing in the basement. It's not supposed to be open to the public, but the door to the stairway isn't locked."

"Was he here in your office when the gas started leaking?"

She got a sweater out of a drawer in the credenza behind her and put it on while she pondered her answer. "I'm not sure where he was," she said finally. "But he wasn't in here, and neither was I. I left him in the reception area you just came through and went into the office next door to mine to talk to our comptroller, Myra Wilkey. She went home a few minutes ago with the migraine she got from standing out in the cold wind, or maybe from breathing the gas, but I can give you her address and phone number if you need them."

"You left Jaggard alone in the reception area?"

"Well, more or less. The receptionist floats in and out of there from time to time." She grinned wryly. "There's nothing much to steal in there except that twelve by eigh-

teen foot Persian rug. Which was imported from Iowa."

"Tell me about the leak. As you saw things happen."

"Myra and I were in her office looking at Mr. Jaggard's prospectus when we both noticed a smell like gas coming from the heating duct under the window. About the same time Kent LeBorgh, our director of security, banged on the door, opened it, and told us there was a gas leak and we should evacuate the building immediately, without touching any switches or stopping to take anything with us. Which is exactly what we did."

"And you didn't see Jaggard after that?"

"No—I completely forgot about him in the excitement. I had visions of an explosion blowing all our electronic files to smithereens. We store backup floppies in a bank vault downtown once a week, but losing even one day's transactions could put us out of business indefinitely."

"Do you have enemies—in the business world, I mean—who would benefit if that happened?"

"We certainly do. But I can't believe any of them would resort to such crude methods as trying to blow us up. There may not be much honor among thieves, but they do tend to stick to thieving, don't they?"

Auburn nodded, thinking she'd make a pretty good cop. Jaggard was a thief of sorts, too, and not very likely to have branched out into playing tricks with gas lines. Then what on earth was he doing in the basement during the leak?

"Was anything disturbed or missing after you came back inside?"

"Not that we've found so far. The fire department smashed in a big plate glass window on the north side of the building, and I understand there's a broken window in the basement where they found the body."

"Were there any other visitors to the building this morning? Anybody here who doesn't work here every day?"

"Not that I know of. I'll check with Cheryl, but I'm almost certain nobody had an appointment with any of the staff this morning."

"When did you learn that Jaggard had been found dead downstairs?"

"Not until this afternoon. We were all standing out on the sidewalk up the street waiting for the big bang when we heard a rumor that the rescue squad had found a body inside. We were going up and down frantically counting heads, trying to figure out if anybody was missing, but it never occurred to me that Mr. Jaggard might still be in here. Just before they gave the all-clear, Mr. LeBorgh told me who it was."

Auburn nodded. "Your security man. If you'll just tell me where I can find him, I won't bother you any more."

The office of the security chief, on the other side of the lobby from hers, was as Spartan as a detention cell. The door and windows were open here, too. He found LeBorgh laboring over a report at an ancient mechanical typewriter that belonged in the Smithsonian.

Fidelis's director of security was fortyish, with thinning hair and an earnest manner. He told Auburn

pretty much the same story he'd told Stamaty that morning. A secretary in the insurance division had called to say her boss smelled gas coming through the heating system. At almost exactly the same time, he'd smelled it himself. According to standard procedure he'd called Fire and Rescue.

"They told me to evacuate the building, leave everything open, use the stairs rather than the elevators, and make sure nobody touched any electrical switches." LeBorgh recited these facts in a tight-lipped, mechanical fashion as if he were on a witness stand. Maybe he thought he was going to find himself there eventually. "I went through the halls on all three levels, knocking on office and restroom doors and routing people out."

"Did you do any kind of head count once you were outside?"

LeBorgh stiffened. "Not as such, no, but it looked to me like everybody was on the sidewalk by the time I got there myself. I know I saw Schartzer out there. He's the maintenance man, and he's the only one who had any business being on the basement level. I decided not to go down there, since by that time I was feeling pretty dizzy and sick from the gas."

"Did you know this Jaggard was in the building?"

"Absolutely not. Never heard of the guy till the paramedics brought me his I.D. I gave that to the man from the coroner's office."

"So visitors to the building don't normally have to go through any kind of security routine?"

LeBorgh bridled again.

"No, sir. This is a business, not a bank."

"Were there any other visitors to the building this morning that you know of?"

"No, but as I said, I don't keep tabs on who comes and who goes."

"I understand. How do I get to the basement where they found Jaggard?"

"I'll take you."

They went through a steel door off the lobby, down a flight of cement stairs, and along a basement passage painted dead white, where the lingering smell of gas actually made Auburn's throat burn. Rounding a corner, they emerged into a big low room crowded with heating and cooling equipment. An access panel had been removed from one of the machines, and a small round man in bib overalls was dithering morosely in front of the opening.

LeBorgh introduced him as Dwight Schartzer, the maintenance supervisor. Schartzer immediately launched into a defensive tirade.

"This is the coupling they found loose," he said, his voice strained and almost hysterical. "And here's the ten-point maintenance routine I go through." He brought a fiber-board folder out from under his arm, opened it under the nearest light, and rapped on it with a knuckle like a ball peen hammer to emphasize each point. "Check vent. Check vent safety switch. Check draft. Check damper settings. Replace filters. Check belts. Check thermocouples. Time ignition cycle. Check limit control. Lubricate fan bearings."

"And that's it. I was never anywhere near that coupling. I finished up before lunch yesterday. There's my initials and the date. And nobody smelled any gas around here until today. If that coupling was loose, it was loosened this morning. Deliberately."

Auburn glanced respectfully over the oil-smeared checklist. "You've got me convinced," he said, "but I'm not here to read the gas meter. The coroner's investigator thinks the man who was found dead down here died of a head wound."

"Possibly he fell and hit his head," suggested LeBorgh. "This floor would crack a bowling ball."

"Could be," said Auburn. "We won't know until after the autopsy. Maybe not then. Where did they find him?"

"You'd have to ask them," said LeBorgh. "But I understand he was right about here."

"And they took him out into the driveway through that door to get him out of the gas?"

"Correct."

Auburn stepped into the sunken driveway that led around to the freight entrance at the back. Opposite the door leading out of the furnace room was a sloping stone retaining wall, above which he saw only a distant church spire and the crested head of the dinosaur in the schoolyard silhouetted against gray sky.

"Did the squad break this window?" he asked.

"They must have," said LeBorgh.

"Why? All they had to do was turn the doorknob. And it looks like a lot of glass is on the inside."

LeBorgh shrugged. "Maybe they had to break in to get at him. You'd have a better chance of getting a look at their report than I would."

"Whoever broke it," snorted Schartzer, "I'll give you one guess who's going to have to fix it."

With no little difficulty Auburn managed to get rid of both men so that he could do some intensive sleuthing. He examined the remains of the broken window and satisfied himself that it had indeed been smashed from outside. He also took a look at the coupling the repair crew from the gas company had found loose.

Then he strolled around the basement trying to remember not to hold his breath and discovered that although the passenger elevator didn't come down to this level there was a service elevator at the rear of the building that did. Exploring farther, he found the receiving entrance, a couple of locked store-rooms, and Schartzer's workshop, where the tools were arranged in racks as regularly as organ pipes.

On entering the basement he'd noticed that it was immaculate, the floor swept as clean as a dinner plate—probably also the work of the compulsive Schartzer. But at one point something crunched under his shoes, and he bent to investigate. He found a light dusting of gray grit on the floor, seemingly identical to what he'd found on his desk that morning after shifting a ceiling tile to pound on the humming light fixture.

Within half a yard of the spot on the basement floor where he'd noticed the grit, a massive iron stan-

chion was set into the wall to anchor a cast-iron drainpipe. Gripping the pipe, he put a foot on the stanchion and hauled himself aloft. When he tried to raise the two by four foot ceiling tile directly above his head, he sensed that there was something heavy resting on its upper surface.

Altering his position, he raised the next panel over and peered into the ceiling cavity with the help of his pocket flashlight. There he found, wrapped in a pair of work gloves, a large monkey wrench with a faint stain on it that might have been blood. These he quickly spirited into a paper bag. He left the building by the door with the broken window and locked the materials he'd found in the trunk of his car.

He reentered the building by the main entrance and, at the risk of interrupting another conference, knocked on Ms. Longcamp's office door. She was alone this time, huddled in her sweater at the open window with a cup of coffee.

She insisted that he have one, too, and that gave him the opportunity to ask the receptionist who brought it, Cheryl Munklin, whether she was aware of any other visitor to the building that morning. She wasn't.

Auburn went through the standard catalogue of inquiries with Reeta Longcamp. Had there been any cleaners, repairers, installers on the premises recently? Did anybody other than the regular staff have access to the building? Was there anybody new on the staff? Any disgruntled employees, shake-ups, firings?

She hesitated before answering the last question. "Our personnel director, Lewis Avery, recently resigned."

"Voluntarily?"

"Not quite. Jack Frost and I made it pretty clear to him that we were going to have to let him go. But he moved to another job in Atlanta a couple of months ago. And I don't think he has enough imagination to walk in here and open up a gas line. Or enough guts."

"I'd like his current address anyway, if you know it. Was there some specific reason why you were letting him go, or was it just poor performance in general?"

"No special reason, but we had a terrible morale problem among the clerical and accounting staff. Still do. Salary levels, annual raises, fringe benefits, leave time, expense accounts—nobody's satisfied with any of it."

"So you do have some unhappy campers on board?" said Auburn, mingling his metaphors with reckless abandon. "Any special troublemakers? Any threats?"

"Oh no. Nothing like that. A general atmosphere of grumbling and discontent. But it's affecting the efficiency of our operation."

"Who took Mr. Avery's place, if you haven't had any new hirings?"

"Nobody yet. He used to report to me. I'm doing the job as best I can for the time being. In fact, I have a management consultant coming in this afternoon who's going to work with me to try to patch things up. We couldn't reach him to cancel. He may be waiting out there now."

"Then I won't take any more of

your time. But would it be possible for me to look at the personnel records for your entire staff? At least get a head count, names and addresses?"

"Cheryl can run a copy of the payroll for you in half a minute. I'd need to talk to our legal counsel before I could release specific records."

"The list will do for a start. Thanks for the coffee."

As he was waiting for Cheryl to print the list from her computer, a stentorian voice filled the lobby with a burst of mild profanity.

"What's this—chemical warfare?"

"I see Buzz has arrived," muttered Cheryl, adding with harsh sarcasm, "the great peacemaker."

Auburn surmised that this must be Reeta Longcamp's personnel consultant. Evidently he was no favorite with Cheryl. Was she one of the malcontents Ms. Longcamp had mentioned? How many others shared her hostility toward the consultant?

The booming voice boomed louder, and Buzz Margilov—motivational engineer, team-builder, and energizer—made his grand entrance. "There are smells, and stinks, and stench," he informed everyone within earshot, possibly including people out on the street. "I'd say this ranks as a stench and a pretty rank stench at that."

Margilov was a hale and heavily built man of sixty or so. He was wearing a white wool turtleneck sweater with a silver medallion the size of a tin can lid hanging from a chain around his neck. He'd missed a loop in threading his belt into his trousers, and most of his left little

finger wasn't there. Auburn couldn't decide whether the flush of his cheeks and the febrile glitter in his eyes was a reflection of his temperament, or chemically induced.

When Reeta Longcamp began explaining the smell of gas in the building, Margilov interrupted her rudely. "Gas, eh? They say it's perfectly harmless as long as you don't inhale."

They disappeared into her office, Margilov ranting and rambling like a stage buffoon, as Auburn slipped away.

Next morning he spent two solid hours at his desk at headquarters wading through reports, documents, and background checks on Jaggard and the staff of Fidelis Financial Associates. Not surprisingly, the accounting staff were all squeaky clean as far as police records were concerned. It was evident that if he wanted to sort out relationships, including possible prior associations with Jaggard, he'd need to pry loose some more detailed information about the staff than Reeta Longcamp had been willing to release yesterday.

The report of the paramedics who had tried to resuscitate Jaggard indicated that they had found him unresponsive and pulseless on the floor of the furnace room. By that time the gas company had already shut off the gas line into the building, but they had still thought it best to move him outside before trying to resuscitate him. There was no mention of their having broken a window in the basement door,

and, more important, no mention of their having noticed that the back of Jaggard's head was caved in. If they'd done the damage themselves, they weren't admitting it.

Stamaty phoned him around ten o'clock to report an interesting development. "Cy, Doc Valentine got hold of some old medical records on Jaggard from Chalfont Hospital. We thought you ought to know he was anosmic."

"He was a which?"

"Anosmic. Couldn't smell. From a head injury in a car accident when he was fifteen. That help any on your end?"

"I guess it might explain why he didn't walk out of the building with everybody else."

The coroner had released Jaggard's personal property to the police. The dead man's car had been moved from the FFA parking lot to the police garage on Gates Street, and would be turned over to the next of kin, who was still being sought. Jaggard's business associates were also being sought, but it seemed more than probable that there weren't any.

From the forensic lab on the top floor came a lengthy report on the gloves and the wrench Auburn had found hidden above the basement ceiling. The night technician, whose dedication to duty was legendary, must have spent hours on it.

The wrench was American-made and of superior quality but could have been bought in any of a dozen local hardware stores. It wasn't brand new. The blood on it was the same type as Orrin Jaggard's. A more precise match would require

DNA typing, which, because of its expense, wouldn't be undertaken without a specific order.

The catalogue of trace evidence on and in the gloves filled a page and a half. They were cheap cotton canvas work gloves, white with blue wristbands, also available at numerous stores around town. Their outside surfaces bore traces of vegetable and mineral oils, solvents, cleansers, adhesives, paints, metal dust, concrete dust, wood fibers, and so on ad infinitum. From the linings, which were heavily soiled, the technician had succeeded in extracting typable human material, including skin cells and sweat. Preliminary studies had failed to match these to Jaggard.

As Auburn was trying to assimilate and organize this wealth of data, Lieutenant Savage appeared on his doorstep with a slip of paper in his hand and a whimsical grin on his face. "Will you look what just came in on the Dagnet?"

Auburn read the printout aloud. "DESCRIPTION OF PERSON WHO BROKE INTO FFA BUILDING: White male about 5'8" stocky build, short black hair, wearing tan suit, no glasses or hat. Godfrey."

Savage stood watching him. "Just when you were praying for inspiration, it comes. Any idea what it means?"

"Sure. It means the guy who smashed in the window of that basement door was Jaggard himself."

It was about half-past eleven when Auburn arrived at Robert Fulton Elementary School on Case Avenue next to the Fidelis Financial Associates building. In compli-

ance with a strictly worded notice on the door, he reported to the office. Actually he had been headed there anyway.

The first person he saw on entering the office recognized him about three seconds before he recognized her. "Aren't you Cy Auburn?" she asked.

"Sure, and you're Mattie Banks. The last time I saw you, you were giving the valedictory address at graduation, eighteen years ago."

"Keep your voice down. Around here they think the principal is still under thirty. And I'm Grace Chapman now. The only one here who dares to call me Mattie is the custodian."

"The which?"

"The janitor. He happens to be Dallas Wolf."

"He would be." Auburn remembered a classmate with long yellow hair, an unfading grin, and a lifelong commitment to the Principle of the Conservation of Energy. "Maybe you didn't know I'm a cop these days," he said, "but I'm sure you know what went on next door yesterday."

"Oh yes. I was on the six o'clock news last night, in positively the rat-tiest outfit I own. Along with the entire student body, who were assembled in the wind and rain, hoping to see the FFA building blow sky high, or at least a couple of dead bodies fall out the windows."

"There was a dead body. You probably know that, too." He pulled out the Dragnet printout. "Have you got a pupil here named Godfrey? I don't know if that's his first name or—"

"There's only one Godfrey," she said with a broad smile. "May I see that?"

He handed her the message. "That came through Dragnet," he said, "the Public Safety Department's anonymous crimestopper Web site, about an hour ago."

"Then he must have sent it from a computer in his room. Come with me."

They went to a second-grade classroom upstairs, where she asked the teacher to send Godfrey Harris out into the corridor. Godfrey proved to be a staid eight-year-old with a complexion like chocolate mousse, eyes like liquid caramel, and features as delicate as an angel's.

"Good morning, Godfrey," said Auburn, showing his badge. "We got your message."

"Is there a reward?"

"I'll have to check. Can you tell me what you saw over there?"

"Sure. This man I told you about went down the ramp by the FFA building, and he had this black thing, like a box, and he used it to break a window, and then he went in the basement door."

"And where were you when you saw that?"

"Out in the playground. Up on the dinosaur." He looked at Ms. Chapman and hesitated a moment before adding, "I can climb all the way up and sit on his head."

"And when did you see this man break in?"

"Yesterday at morning recess. Right before the firetrucks came."

"It would have been between ten fifteen and ten thirty," said Grace Chapman.

Auburn frowned. "Any possibility it was earlier than that?"

"Absolutely none. Godfrey would have been in class before then. Even if he weren't, anybody climbing on the dinosaur out in the playground before classes let out for recess would have been seen by half the school."

Auburn returned to his car to think things through. The gas leak had been reported at nine forty-four A.M. Yet at least a half-hour later Godfrey had seen Jaggard walking around outside the building, and breaking *in*. The time had to be right. Godfrey couldn't have seen the event from anywhere but the dinosaur head, since the dinosaur head was all that Auburn had been able to see from outside the basement door.

Either Jaggard had been outside during the whole time of the gas leak or—he picked up his car radio and called headquarters.

Back at the FFA offices, the plate glass window that Fire and Rescue had smashed was boarded up with raw plywood, pending replacement. The gas smell inside the building was still unpleasantly pungent. Reeta Longcamp seemed somehow less serene and invulnerable today than she had the day before.

"I have an evidence technician coming in a few minutes to check some things down in the basement," he told her. "Just wanted to let you know. Things settling down around here?"

"Things are totally out of control around here. What happened yesterday set off a storm that's been brewing for weeks. I'm just about

fed up with my staff, and they're not too happy with me, either. We had a major malfunction this morning when some nitwit entered a letter in a number domain on an electronic spreadsheet."

"Are you sure that just happened this morning? What are the chances that Jaggard tampered with your computer yesterday while everybody was out of the building?"

"I thought of that. But he wouldn't have known the passwords to get into any of our programs, and he wouldn't have made a mistake like that—computers are his business. But no, I'm not sure it happened today."

"Um, those personnel records—"

"I talked to our counsel, Stu Stepick, and he said to let you have them. Since Buzz Margilov has already had access to them. Speaking of people I'm fed up with."

"What's he been doing to get in your hair?"

She put her hands on her cheeks in a gesture of desperation. "He came highly recommended as a witty, charming, dynamic labor relations consultant. Well, he's nothing but a crackpot. I'm going to have a mutiny on my hands if I go along with him and make my staff undergo psychological testing. He's the one who needs psychological testing."

"He wants me to get everybody together in the conference room upstairs this afternoon for what he calls a team-building session, with blindfolds, balloons, and rubber bats. Am I old fashioned, or—"

The arrival of Sergeant Kestrel, the director of the forensic lab, cut

their conversation short. Auburn and Kestrel went to the basement to find Schartzner.

After a brief conference with the maintenance supervisor, Kestrel tackled the furnace in his customary intense, brisk, determined manner. Within ten minutes he had recovered the remains of a broken glass vial from the blower unit of the furnace whose gas line had been found loose the day before. Even the slight residue of mercaptan in the vial was enough to curdle milk at fifty paces.

After sealing it in a specimen jar, Kestrel took a look around Schartzner's shop next to the furnace room and casually drew Auburn's attention to a gap in a rack of wrenches, into which the murder weapon would have fitted exactly. There were also several pairs of work gloves just like the ones Auburn had found.

When Auburn left FFA, he had a thick folder of personnel records. After lunch he was at his desk, up to his elbows in papers, when Stamaty called again with a preliminary report on the autopsy on Jaggard. Death had been due to skull fracture and cerebral hemorrhage, and definitely not to asphyxiation.

During the course of the afternoon Auburn got some information he'd requested on Buzz Margilov. The team-builder's degrees in business and psychology had come from a correspondence school in Wales. He'd been in and out of drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs for years. But he had no criminal convictions.

Auburn was scanning the person-

nel records from FFA for the second time when a strong suspicion began to take shape in his mind. A phone call to Reeta Longcamp squashed that idea but created a still stronger suspicion in another direction. Auburn's stomach began to churn as it often did when an arrest was imminent.

He was back at FFA by three P.M., in plenty of time to consult with Buzz Margilov before the team-building session started. Knowing that Margilov was as phony as he looked somehow made it easier for Auburn to talk him into letting him use the first few minutes of the assembly to pursue his investigation into the death of Orrin Jaggard.

Only nineteen people turned up for the session, which was held in a conference room on the third floor, a long, narrow room with green velvet drapes that matched the plush carpet. Between the windows the blond paneling was adorned with bronze escutcheons bearing the FFA logo. The furniture had been pushed to one side of the room, and various props—balloons, colored ribbons, paper hats, and scarves—were stacked on the conference table.

At first Auburn felt somewhat uneasy addressing an audience of twenty more-or-less grumpy people, mostly strangers—especially in view of the surprise he had in store for them. But he hit his stride once the adrenaline started flowing.

"I thought, since you were all going to be here this afternoon, it would be a good chance for me to get your help in putting together just what happened yesterday. We have evidence that the gas leak was

faked. You've probably already heard by the grapevine that we discovered a broken tube of mercaptan inside the furnace. That's the stuff that makes gas smell. It's only slightly poisonous, and not explosive.

"Whoever put that mercaptan in the furnace did it to get everybody out of the building. Later on, the same person loosened a gas connection so that when Fire and Rescue came they'd find a real leak. The man who died, Orrin Jaggard, had no sense of smell and evidently didn't hear the directions to evacuate the building. But for some reason he did go outside, and then broke back into the basement.

"Jaggard was a small-time crook, and he was probably up to something shady when he got killed. He literally burst in on the person who was loosening the gas connection in the basement, and in order to avoid exposure, that person fatally injured him with the wrench he was using. The question is, who was it? I'd like to get your help in figuring out where everybody was during the evacuation of the building. How many of you saw Orrin Jaggard—while he was still alive?"

Only Reeta Longcamp and Cheryl Munklin raised their hands.

"Some of you probably left the building together. Would you stand together according to how you went out yesterday?"

After milling around a bit the staff formed into five groups corresponding to the parts of the building in which they worked. Reeta Longcamp, Dwight Schartzer, and Kent LeBorgh each remained standing

alone. By questioning the people in the groups and referring to his list of the full staff, Auburn was able to account for the whereabouts of all the absent employees during or immediately after the evacuation.

The comptroller, Ms. Wilkey, in whose company Reeta Longcamp claimed to have left the building, wasn't at the meeting—nor, indeed, were any of the other top brass except one trust officer. Several of the staff had seen Ms. Longcamp outside on the sidewalk, but no one had seen her leaving the building. And the same was true for the director of security and the maintenance supervisor.

"Okay," said Auburn. "So far, so good. Now, we know the reason behind the faked gas leak. It was a crackpot scheme if there ever was one and it's no wonder it didn't work. Several of you have what I believe you call liquid share accounts with the company. Anybody with access to the right computer terminal could credit their account with a few extra thousand if they knew the password to get into the program. Or, if they didn't know it, they could wait until one of the accounting people had logged on, and then they could—fake a gas leak.

"When a gas leak is reported to Fire and Rescue, they order the evacuation of the building and tell everybody not to touch any electric switches. That includes computer keys. And mouses. So as soon as the building was cleared yesterday, the criminal could have gone to a computer and entered phony accounting data even without knowing any passwords."

He turned to Margilov, who stood cracking his knuckles in the doorway. "How long have you had access to the personnel records of FFA?" he asked.

"Couple of weeks."

"Including Ms. Longcamp's?"

"No, sir. I wasn't so honored."

"Neither was I. But I've reviewed the records of everyone else here. And I was interested to learn that one member of the staff has been taking courses in computers and accounting—at company expense—for the past year. Exactly where were you, Mr. Schartzer, when the gas leak occurred? The real one?"

Schartzer turned scarlet and fumbled with the straps of his overalls. "When I smelled the gas," he said, "I was in here, moving that furniture over against the wall. The first thing I thought—" he stopped and swallowed—"was that I must have made some kind of a mistake when I did the maintenance check on the furnace the day before."

"I took the freight elevator down to the basement, but by the time I got there the fumes were so strong I was afraid there was going to be an explosion any second. So I ducked out the basement door and ran up the driveway to the street. I watched from the sidewalk on Glade Avenue until they gave the all-clear."

"Orrin Jaggard was apparently killed with one of your wrenches," said Auburn, "by somebody wearing a pair of your work gloves. Any comment on that?"

Schartzer took a deep breath and exhaled noisily through his nose. "No, sir. I didn't kill anybody, and

I didn't mess with my share account."

"I believe you. As the maintenance supervisor, you'd be the first person to be suspected of faking a gas leak. And since you've been taking computer courses for the past year, you wouldn't have made the mistake that the criminal made in trying to jack up his account."

"The person who faked the gas leak and killed Orrin Jaggard tried to add sixteen thousand dollars to the balance in an account in his wife's maiden name. He gave himself away by using the key for the letter *L* instead of the key for the number *one*. On a computer they're different, but on an old fashioned typewriter, you use the lower-case *L* key to make a number one, don't you, Mr. LeBorgh?"

Auburn had expected the security man to give in quietly when he saw he was licked, since he didn't carry a weapon and was surrounded by a crowd. But before Auburn had even read him his rights, LeBorgh went ballistic. He managed to dive successfully through a wall of people, but then he ran into Buzz Margilov in the doorway.

The great peacemaker, as Cheryl had called him, proved to be a willing and capable warrior as well. He bounced LeBorgh off the wall like a handball, with the result that Auburn had to call the paramedics back to Case Avenue.

As they took LeBorgh away, the team-building process commenced in earnest in the conference room, but with one player permanently benched.

Missing

David Braly

At first he noticed nothing odd as he turned into his driveway and approached the house. Everything looked about the same as usual for that time of evening. George Ingerson knew this because there had been other occasions when he did not arrive home until an hour or two after dark. Linda occasionally had lights on at almost every window on both floors of the big house, the illumination falling lushly upon the trees and foliage around it. Tonight it was that way. There could hardly have been more lights if there had been a party inside.

Ingerson put the car in the garage and walked round to the front door. Usually Linda locked the door about dusk, but he tried the knob anyway and was mildly surprised when it turned. He went inside.

"Linda!" he called. "It's me. I'm home."

There was no answer. That was odd. Usually she answered right away.

He dropped his attaché case and jacket on the sofa and walked through the dining room to the kitchen. "Linda! Where are you?"

Still no answer.

Now he became concerned. She was obviously nowhere downstairs or she would have heard him and answered.

The unlocked door bothered him now. And so many lights' being on. Linda turning on lights and leaving them on was normal for her, but it was very early in the night for so many to be on. Taken together with the unlocked front door . . .

He had always warned her to lock the door at night. They were no longer in Idaho. This was California. Worse, Southern California. Murder, murder everywhere.

If something had happened to Linda—

He ran out of the kitchen, across the dining room and living room to the stairs. He rushed up the stairs. His heart was pounding hard. Concern had given way to fear.

"Linda!" he called when he reached the second floor hall. "Linda, are you up here?"

No answer.

He ran from room to room.

No Linda.

Something had happened to her. Something had really, really happened to her! He had feared violence ever since they'd arrived in Los Angeles County but never actually truly sincerely believed it would touch them.

He hurried downstairs again, wondering what to do next. Call the police? Yes! But would they respond? Wasn't there a police rule about waiting forty-eight hours before accepting a missing person report? They might think she'd merely run away from home.

The quarrel. He'd forgotten the quarrel. It was minor, just a tiff over his looking at another woman's legs, but it had been public. Not only public, it had been in Perino's. And the restaurant had been full. Probably a dozen people overheard them. And the waitress. If the police found out, they might think it had been serious and that she had left him.

Or worse. Yes, much worse. They might think he'd killed her. It happened all the time: a husband murdered his wife, hid the body, and then called the cops to report her missing. They would see through his story immediately. He'd go to jail. To prison.

He looked at the phone on the little table beneath the mirror without making a move toward it. No longer did he want to call the police. Of course, delaying after finding his wife gone might be interpreted as a sign of guilt.

Trapped. No matter what he did he would be their top suspect.

He searched his mind for an excuse to delay calling. Maybe if he said that he hadn't noticed her missing at first . . . No. Of course he'd notice his wife wasn't home when he arrived an hour after dusk and found all the lights on and the door unlocked. Maybe if he said he'd first searched the house to make sure she hadn't fallen and wasn't on the floor unconscious somewhere . . . Yes, that was a good excuse.

In fact, she might be.

Maybe she had gone down into the basement for something and fallen on those concrete steps. Maybe she really was down there, bleeding to death, while he stood in the living room like a total jerk worrying about what the police would think.

He rushed to the kitchen and opened the basement door. "Linda!" he called. "Are you down there?"

No answer.

He turned on the light and started down. Halfway down the stairs he suddenly realized he was being foolish. If an intruder had broken in—or rather walked in through the open front door—the man might be down there with her. Armed.

He stopped on the stairs. Should he return for his pistol? Probably. But it would take time to retrieve it from the nightstand by their bed upstairs. If she weren't being held prisoner but had only fallen and were badly hurt, time was something she might not have.

Against his better judgment he went on down the stairs.

He reached the floor. The basement was big and cluttered. There were many places a man could hide, and many places a hurt or dead woman might be on the floor unseen. He remembered Elizabeth Montgomery in

The Victim going down to the basement of her house and never seeing her murdered sister's body in a not completely closed box. Not until after her brother-in-law attempted to kill her.

He tried to put the movie out of his mind. He spent five minutes doing a thorough search of the basement.

Nothing.

Should he be relieved or more frightened?

He hurried upstairs again. The possibility remained that she had fallen; he hadn't searched all the rooms on the first floor.

He meticulously searched every room. But she was nowhere in the house.

By now he was in a state bordering upon panic. He realized it, but despite the realization he couldn't bring the panic under control. Linda was gone. The love of his life was missing. He didn't know if she'd been kidnapped for ransom or to rape or murder. But clearly somebody had taken her. Or a gang of somebodies. Maybe a motorcycle gang. Southern California was full of motorcycle gangs.

Was she still alive? Probably. They couldn't have taken her long ago; the lights were already on when it happened. So it had happened after dark, say within the last hour and a half. They were holding her someplace. Maybe raping her even then. Or killing her even then.

He went to the telephone. Just as he reached for it, he heard a noise behind him.

He turned, but it was nothing. Only the snap of a board or something similar. In Idaho the wood in the walls and floors had snapped while it expanded and contracted all day and all night with the changing temperature. Not so in Los Angeles. At least not nearly as much as in Idaho. Still, the house had noises.

There was something sinister about the house. At least he felt so. Maybe it had been built over an Indian's grave. Or a whole Indian graveyard. Maybe a ghost or a tribe of ghosts haunted it, although until now there had been no sign of them. Just snaps and crackles in the night.

No, that wasn't it. This crisis had caused his imagination to run wild. The next thing he'd think of would be alien abduction.

Of course, she was gone, and obviously abducted, and if the neighbors hadn't seen or heard anything—which they evidently hadn't, since they had not come over and apparently had not called the police—it could have been anyone, or *anything*, that took her.

Again he reached for the phone but stopped when he realized that his hand was trembling. He had to get himself under control. If he didn't, the police were bound to think that he was the culprit.

"Why us?" he whispered to himself. "Why did this have to happen to Linda and me?"

He took a deep breath and for the third time reached for the phone. The kitchen door flew open.

"Hi, hon," said Linda. "You're late again."

"Uh, yeah, I got held up at the office. Where were you?"

"What do you mean? I've been right here."

"I've been home for more than twenty minutes and didn't see you."

"Oh. Erica and I have been visiting over the fence for a half hour or so. She told me her brother's coming from Arizona to visit. He's the one who made all that money investing in software companies during the eighties. Dinner tonight will be fish. Do you want fries or rice?"

"Fries."

Ingerson went over to the sofa and retrieved his jacket, which he took upstairs and put away in the closet. He then took the attaché case into the library and set it by the desk. It contained papers he needed to work on that evening.

After he returned to the living room, he took the *Los Angeles Times* off the coffee table. He hadn't had time that morning to look at it. He would only have time now to read the sports section and comics.

Linda came into the living room.

"How was your day?" she asked.

"The same as usual. How was yours?"

Note to Our Readers: If you have difficulty finding *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* at your preferred retailer, we want to help. First, let the store manager know that you want the store to carry this magazine. Then send us a letter or postcard mentioning AHMM and giving us the full name and address of the store. Write to us at: Dell Magazines, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220.

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which he would race through to get to the kitchen. He would go into the front room where the woman had been killed only if his masters were with him. Even then, if he slept he shivered uncomfortably and twitched, his dreams apparently disturbed by dark visions.

My own sleep was invariably broken as I took to waking at night and watching the house for lights or movement. During my trips to headquarters I sought out other officers who'd lived in 118. Some spoke of noises and a sudden sense of fear when walking through certain rooms and halls. One man told me how his wife spent afternoons talking to the ensign's wife's spirit as if to a friend. Many were reluctant to talk of Quarters 118 at all, but after I assured them that my interest was neither morbid nor unfriendly, they often opened up.

Finally one Saturday morning my neighbor came to visit me. A big man with a florid complexion, he looked as if he'd lately faded and shrunk inside his clothes, which hung loosely on his frame. He appeared years older than when we'd last spoken, and his hand shook as he poured the bourbon I offered him. He started by saying that something was wrong with the old house he lived in, that it was a strange place. Then he smiled as if his words had been said half in jest, words he could disavow if I took the wrong meaning. But his eyes were serious as he waited for my response. When I shrugged and answered that I knew, that I'd felt it, too, he shook himself like a dog

coming out of a pond, more a shudder than a shake as if he were freeing himself from a physical burden.

He stood up and turned his back to Quarters 118. I could see a question forming in his mind as his eyes bored into mine. Could he trust me? When he decided it was just barely possible that he could, words began to pour out of him like a flood. He told me how he thought he could hear sounds in the night, one repeated noise being a rhythmic thumping that he imagined to be the poor woman's body being dragged up the stairs. It didn't happen every night, but he often lay awake thinking about it, waiting for it to start. It went *ka-thump, ka-thump* thirteen times, one for each step. Then it stopped and started again as if from a distance, working its way up the stairs.

The man and his wife were nearly out of their minds with fear. They thought the thumping sound was the woman's head striking the stairs. Lying in bed, they listened to each thump, counting.

They could never summon the courage to look in the hallway, although the man had put a powerful flashlight and a pistol by his bedside. He smiled grimly as he told me that he'd stopped drinking beer in the evening so he wouldn't have to relieve himself during the night. His dog Sam heard it, too, and would cower against the side of the bed, whimpering slightly.

One night Sam started to growl. They listened for the noise on the stairs but heard nothing. The dog stared up at the ceiling in the cor-

ner of the room, the part nearest the beam where the young ensign had hanged himself. Sam's eyes rolled, the whites showing clearly in the darkness. Was it just imagination or was it blacker in that corner, as if something hovered there in the room? The dog seemed to think so. What could he see that they couldn't? A trembling hand around his drink, my colleague said he'd finally made himself turn on the lamp—but saw nothing.

He then told me about the problem with the two lights, one at the top of the stairs and one in the attic, something other tenants had also described. They had been repeatedly tested by the base electrician and determined to be in perfect working order, but no bulb placed in the sockets would burn for more than a single day.

In the winter, when he drove up to the house after work, it would be completely dark, some lights not working and others apparently switched off. Once he thought he saw someone standing in a front window, barely illumined by the glow from the nearby road. But when he entered, no one was there, and he couldn't be sure of what he had seen.

Most unsettling of all was his experience on the Sunday afternoon a week earlier when he had been pacing the front room thinking his way through a training exercise that he had to set up and run during the following week. His wife was in town shopping, and he was alone in the house with Sam, who suddenly sat up, yelped, and raced

down the hall to the kitchen. He could hear the dog push open the screen door and run out into the yard. The door slammed behind him.

For all he knew, Sam had bolted in pursuit of a squirrel glimpsed out the window, but somehow he thought not.

I suddenly felt uneasy, as I realized that my neighbor's story had reached a critical point. I feared hearing any more; at the same time I needed to know everything. He stared down at the kitchen table, not wanting to look at me as he spoke, not sure if he could describe his experience. He told me how he'd stopped his pacing and stood as if frozen in his living room because an inner voice warned him of something—he paused before he used the word—evil.

It had been one of those rare early fall days on the Peninsula with a pure white light pouring in through the house's front windows, illuminating the motes of dust in the air and making them look like floating jewels. Near the fireplace was an upholstered Queen Anne chair that had come with the house. As my neighbor looked nervously around the front room, he saw, and yet did not see, a form, shapeless and nearly invisible, combining and dissolving in the glowing air. Whatever was there hung suspended over the chair, gaining strength and color and then almost disappearing, like an etching on a sheet of glass that twisted and turned, hanging in the sun. For a moment he thought he

saw it, a young man grinning at him, his head lopsided on an elongated neck, his uniform old fashioned and of navy white. The eyes were deep holes, black, pitiless. And then it was gone.

My neighbor crashed through the front door, terrified, ripping the screen door off its hinges as he went. He and Sam ran wildly and played together, trying to exorcise the spirit through violent movement. Neither of them looked at the house. When he and his wife gingerly reentered hours later, whatever had terrified him was gone. Perhaps it was just a trick of the afternoon light and had never existed at all.

A week later he left The Farm. To escape the house he accepted a dangerous assignment in the Middle East that no one else would take. I later heard he and his wife had separated and then divorced.

For myself, I could not sleep with the memory of his story. I soon followed him in leaving The Farm, taking the first opportunity to go back overseas, picking up my wife in England on the way. I remember looking over my shoulder when I pulled away in my Jeep past Quarters 118. Was something in the bedroom window as I turned? I couldn't say for sure, but the eye and mind can play tricks.

Now, sixteen years later, I still think of the house and sometimes I even see it in my dreams. When the memory is particularly strong, I have a nightmare in which I can

see myself lying again in a bedroom in my old farmhouse, unable to move. When the night is dark and cold and the wind whistles, in my dreams I can sometimes hear what my neighbor heard. My heart beats loudly as if it wants to tear through my chest, and then the noise on the steps begins, the rhythmic *ka-thump, ka-thump*. When that happens, I wake up thrashing, covered in a cold sweat, and my wife has to wrap her arms around me and hold me tight until I become aware of where I am, safe at home in my bed. I lie awake afterwards and think of that lonely house surrounded by dark trees. Could it have been my own loneliness, my own fears, that I saw in the house? Perhaps. But what did my neighbor see?

Now that I am many miles away from Camp Peary, my life fully engaged in the problems of rearing children and earning my keep outside the government's embrace, my nightmares are less frequent. But I can't help but wonder if they are still there, the ensign and his wife. Are they merely the shadow of what has been, captured by some accident of time and place? If so, what force compels them to return over and over again to that terrible place to replay their private horror like actors on a stage? And how will they finish something that should never have begun? If ancient walls of brick and wood can hold secrets, the answer may still be there, in Quarters 118.

BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



Thomas Cook, bestselling author of *The Chatham School Affair* and *Breakheart Hill* (a personal favorite), has penned another lyrical, whispery mystery in the spirit of Wilkie Collins titled **Places in the Dark** (Bantam, \$23.95). The time is the fall of 1937; the place, a seaside village in Maine. Cal, the narrator, is a decent, well-meaning young man, one of two sons of the owner of the local paper. He stands (quite willingly) in the shadow of his brother Billy, who inherited the charms of their mother, a woman of great spirit and beauty. When a lovely, fragile young woman comes to town with little more than the clothes on her back, the story takes a violent twist. It is Cal who must search for Dora until he can learn the whole truth. Using his inimitable flashback style, Cook mesmerized this reader anyway with a tale of simple people whose fate ties them to resounding tragedy.

Gerry Boyle's **Borderline** (Berkley Prime Crime, \$6.99) is full of adrenaline-pumping action injected into amateur-sleuth fiction. For a travel article he is writing, Jack McMorrow, a former *New York Times* reporter who gave up the rat race and moved to Maine, is doggedly re-tracing Benedict Arnold's Revolutionary War trek to Quebec. That's how he finds himself in the shoe-factory town (*one* shoe factory) of Scanesett, standing outside the gas station/lunch counter/bus terminal when the bus driver realizes he's short a passenger. When the man doesn't show up (where the heck is there to go in Scanesett anyway?), the driver takes off without him, leaving Jack with a puzzle that his reporter instincts just can't leave alone. An intriguing opener, a compelling main character, super action scenes, a whiff of history, and great local color.

Another Maine entry, a cosy, is **Wicked Fix** (Bantam Crime Line, \$5.99) by Sarah Graves. The setting is Eastport, a picturesque place where former New York financial consultant Jacobia Tiptree has moved with her teenage son. It's autumn, and preparations for the annual Salmon Fest should be foremost in everyone's mind. But a couple of people distract them: the town bully has returned, and Jacobia's ex-husband,

a neurotic but talented surgeon, has also relocated to Eastport. It may be inevitable that the bully finally gets his comeuppance; the shocker is that the cops believe Jacobia's ex did the deed. Engaging characters and a strong sense of place make this a pleasure.

Aaron Elkins whisks fans of his *Skeleton Detective* (a nickname the hero scorns!) and his likeable wife to Les Eyzies-de-Tayac, a charming French village, in ***Skeleton Dance*** (Morrow, \$23). Although this time he's on vacation, Gideon Oliver has been here before, doing research in forensic anthropology at the internationally known Institut de Préhistoire. When a dog unearths modern human bones at one of the caves or "digs" managed by the institute, an inspector friend of Gideon's suspects they belong to one of the group's affiliates. Gideon has the expertise to identify the victim and is also familiar with the several members of the institute who are prime suspects. Don't look to Gideon Oliver and his world for excitement and action; savor the enjoyable company, the charming locale, and the background of prehistoric-bone study and its implications.

Regency author Jane Austen returns in her fifth outing as heroine and amateur sleuth in Stephanie Barron's ***Jane and the Stillroom Maid*** (Bantam, \$22.95). This narrative covers a week when Jane travels with her mother, sister, and cousin, a minister, through Derbyshire, the setting of her later *Pride and Prejudice*. Fans of that classic will recognize the places and people that inspired Austen when she wrote the novel years later. (Such great fun!) But Jane can't ramble the hills of this dramatic, untamed country without stumbling across a murder victim. Her unladylike native wit, uncompromising honesty, and flair for crimesolving impel her to seek out the truth. When her old friend Lord Harold, the Gentleman Rogue, arrives, requesting her help, all caution is thrown to the winds—yet again. It does appear that Miss Austen is doomed to spinsterhood, but it's a relief to know that occasionally her marital chances were flung away for a very good cause.

K.C. Constantine has been respected by mystery readers and critics for more than two decades. In ***Grievance*** (Mysterious Press, \$23.95), the latest Rocksbury, Pennsylvania, novel, Detective Ruggiero Carlucci is carrying on admirably in the footsteps of his mentor, Mario Balzic. "Rugs" is called in to assist the state trooper first on the scene when a wealthy, retired executive was shot in his own driveway. But don't read Constantine to find out whodunit (Rugs makes an accurate intuitive guess from a phone conversation with one of dozens of suspects!). Read him to see how this hardworking, unassuming cop is handling the increasingly painful situation with his aging mother, pressure from a jealous colleague, and his growing yearning for a beautiful woman he's been casually meeting. Believe me, exploring the past of the greedy victim pales beside the drama of this decent guy trying to keep the peace in his sadly depressed blue-collar hometown.

Beth Saulner's mouthy young heroine, Alex Bernier, lights up **Dis-temper** (Warner, \$6.50) and proves a worthy adversary to the nutcase brutally killing coeds in an upstate New York college town. Alex, a reporter on the local paper, is slowly making a comeback from a brush with a killer a year earlier. She lost her boyfriend that time, so she's not eager to jump into this investigation. The murderer, however, has other ideas. Along the way, just enjoy Alex's highspirited, irreverent view of life: "It had been a damn long time since I'd actually had what might be described as a date, and I was positively giddy at the prospect. I felt as though I should go get my hair done, or at least try to pull the dog hair off my sweater with some masking tape." Good old Alex.

Framed in Lace (Berkley Prime Crime, \$5.99), Monica Ferris's second book in her series featuring the owner of a charming needlework shop, should please cosy lovers. Middle-aged Betsy Devonshire is coping with her new life in the small Minnesota lakeside town where she runs Crewel World, the shop she inherited from her sister. Betsy had good reason to poke her nose into her sister's death (the debut novel in this series), but she sees no earthly excuse for getting involved when a skeleton is found aboard an antique ferry that has been resting in a watery grave since 1949 and is now being hauled up for restoration. The only clue to the body's identity, however, is a scrap of handmade lace that was disinterred with it. The local constabulary figure that someone who patronizes the needlework shop just might set them on the killer's trail. Against a colorful tapestry of small-town life, Ferris stitches together a seamless plot with threads of jealousy and hatred that go back fifty years.

Looking for a thriller with danger, romance, an exotic locale, and an anguished heroine? Then look no further than Marius Gabriel's **House of Many Rooms** (Bantam, \$6.99). Rebecca Carey is a respected pediatrician, but she has never stopped following the lives of wealthy entrepreneur Michael Florio and his socialite wife Barbara. They're the couple who adopted the baby that Rebecca and her teenaged boyfriend gave up more than a decade earlier. Now there's big trouble in her daughter's life: first the fiery death of her adoptive mother; followed by the media's accusation that she set the fire; and then her abrupt disappearance with her charismatic father and older sister. Is the sexy Florio willing to sacrifice anything to protect his daughters? Or is there another secret he must hide from the world? Rebecca follows the trio to Tuscany to seek answers. Brooding prose and some neat plot twists highlight this one.

THE STORY THAT WON

The February Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Mark Truman of Tustin, California. Honorable mentions go to John Sheppard of Santa Monica, California; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; R. Williamson of Hayward, California; P. Friedman of



Springfield, Virginia; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; Bill Carroll of Chicago, Illinois; Kate Karp of Long Beach, California; Virginia Thompson of Alameda, California; John Sheehan of Kings Park, New York; and Susanne Bohne of Jersey City, New Jersey.

Craig Perman Pictures

MRS. FRIBBISH AND THE CANDY MAN by Mark Truman

Mrs. Fribbish had first noticed the phenomenon while feeding the birds in Cozy Corner Park. The groundskeeper went to the small jungle gym, unearthed a plastic Baggie, then shoved something into one of the horizontal bars high up on the jungle gym. Later in the day the ice cream man parked his truck and went to the public restrooms. On the way back to his truck he took whatever was inside the bar, dropped another Baggie, and kicked sand over it.

After a month of watching, Mrs. Fribbish decided that retirement paid very little and that it might be nice to have some extra cash for birdseed and such. After the groundskeeper passed, she climbed onto the jungle gym and peered into the bar. Before she could focus up close, she spotted a DEA agent in the distance, wearing sweatpants and a baseball cap. Their eyes met. In a display fueled by adrenaline, Mrs. Fribbish grabbed the top bar with both hands and began swinging her body back and forth. Mrs. Fribbish built up enough momentum to go over the bar completely in a maneuver gymnasts call a giant. The DEA man stood with his arms crossed, dumbfounded. The tinkly little song of the ice cream truck going by fell on deaf ears.

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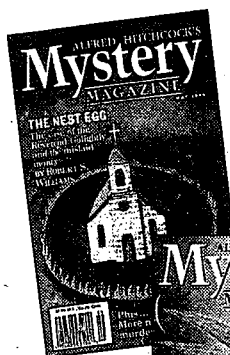
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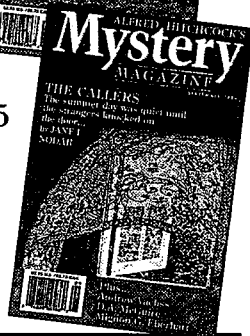
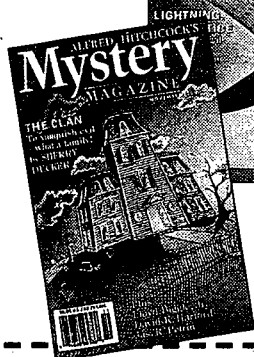
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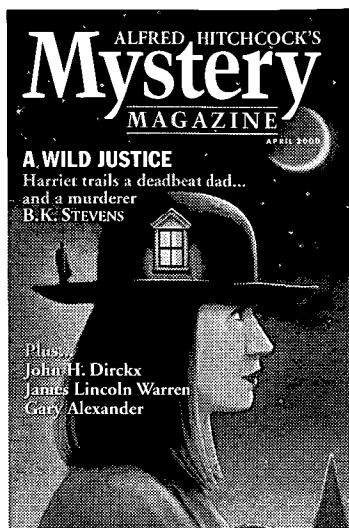
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5P211

Finally—a "cure" for bad breath!

For years, the cause of chronic bad breath has been misdiagnosed, but a dentist's research has led to TheraBreath™, a dramatic treatment system that works naturally and effectively.



It is estimated that over 80 million people worldwide suffer from bad breath, or halitosis. In the past, treatment has consisted of masking the odor with mouthwashes or mints, flooding the mouth with alcohol-based rinses, or the latest craze, popping pills that claim to cure the problem in the stomach. None of these treatments work, because halitosis is caused by bacteria on the back of the tongue and upper throat that produce sulfurous gases. The way to stop bad breath is to stop this process, and this is the secret behind the revolutionary TheraBreath™ system.

A scientific solution. As a dentist with a degree in bacteriology, Dr. Harold Katz has been keenly aware of the widespread nature of this problem. It was not until his daughter came to him about her halitosis, however, that he began to research the problem in earnest.

Dear Dr. Katz,

Our son has had a breath problem for years. He tried mouthwashes and mints.

We took him to doctors and dentists, and even had his tonsils removed.

Nothing worked, until he tried your product.

I am so thankful and thrilled that you found the solution to his problem. You'll never know how much you changed his life!

—M.C., Los Angeles

His studies led him to an amazing discovery about the source of bad breath: it does not originate in the digestive system, and the food you eat has no direct effect on your breath.

Certain foods, however, contribute to the production of sulfurous gases in the back of the mouth. Mints and mouthwashes intended to mask, or prevent bad breath actually worsen the condition because sugar and alcohol dry out the mouth. Many common

pressure to depression have the same drying effect, resulting in the formation of odorous gases. Mucous from post-nasal drip contains dense proteins that are full of sulfur. Some treatments for halitosis contain Sodium Lauryl Sulfate, which can cause canker sores. The only effective means of eliminating the sulfur gas production is to introduce oxygen to the bacteria, causing them to produce tasteless, odorless sulfates.

Effective, safe and natural. At his California Breath Clinic, Dr. Katz has perfected a five-step program for treating halitosis. By using these products on a regular basis, chronic halitosis sufferers can end their problem. The TheraBreath system eliminates the problem of bitter or sour taste in the mouth, improves general periodontal health and will even whiten teeth. TheraBreath has a mild spearmint flavor that tastes great and creates pleasant, neutral breath. It contains no SLS compounds, so you will not suffer from an increase in canker sores or any other side effects. These products are all-natural and simply introduce a greater amount of oxygen into the mouth's chemistry.

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